

Professor Meena Kumari: Sir like you want me to define poetry?

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes define, describe. Give us your opinion.

Professor Meena Kumari: Poetry is a beautiful form of literature. The same time it's a very important form of literature and a nice way to define what is poetry, I just do not want to define like Wordsworth. I feel my own definition is that a piece of writing which evokes the emotional response in a reader. Something that ignites a spark when you read a poem. So, I would like to put poetry in this way, as 'a piece of writing which evokes strong emotional response when we read.'

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is great. Poetry is evocative. That is what you mean. That is good. Yes ma'am, your opinion please.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes, so poetry is actually a vast genre which really defies definition in a nutshell. But my attempt to define poetry would be that poetry is a living experience in itself. And either it presence the living experiences as madam said, it evokes the emotional responses in an imaginative language through sound, rhythm and images and also other too like the ideas which forms the major part of poetry. So, I would say that poetry actually transcends all the boundaries and aspiring to have the universal brotherhood and that is how I look at poetry.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Thank you ma'am. So here we have universal experience and ma'am has evocative experience in all we respond to poetry from our heart, from our mind and we feel happy about reading poetry. That is good. Now, our next question is relating to why we like teaching poetry? We have so many other subjects, prose, drama, novel but there is some kind of special liking for poetry. What could be the reason for your liking of poetry ma'am?

Professor Meena Kumari: I do teach prose also but why I prefer teaching poetry is that, as I told you it evokes the emotional response in a person and moreover poetry is something like a form of a string of words and each word has got an image. For example, when a teacher reads, beauty is truth, truth beauty. The moment I say beauty, one sort of an image comes to a mind. When I say beauty some another image may come to you and some other image may come to her. So, poetry gives an opportunity for us to interpret it in so many ways and that draws countless meanings.

If you take W B Yeats among school children, how can we know the dancer from the dance? When a teacher reads in South India the students might think of Bharatanatyam, in Kerala it might be Kathakali, for you it might be Mohiniyattam. Suppose an African class the teacher is going to read, it must be an African dance. So, we can just transfer as, because what is so sweet about poetry is that Sir the fluidity in poetry. It does not confirm to certain rules whereas prose also can evoke your feelings but it confirms to certain rules. There is no fluidity as that of poetry and the feelings which a poem evokes is much more and much more, stronger when compared to prose.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is beautifully done. Thank you, Ma'am. What about you ma'am?

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes sir. I just would like to quote Robert Graysmith's interview to Horizon says that, being a poet is not a profession but it is a condition. So likewise, I feel personally that teaching poetry is a very natural way of speaking or the natural response. I would rather give and I enjoy teaching poetry. And more than that I feel that poetry gives a sense of humanity.

So, where I would like to put few lines where we could see that when Matthew Arnold goes on with his Dover Beach where he tries to explain about the Victorian Morality that are being in depletion. So, he makes a transition taking the microcosmic world and getting onto the microcosmic world.

So, he beautifully starts the poem saying that, the sea is calm tonight and then he makes a transition there the sea of faith was once too full and he expresses his anguish and later we find that he concludes the poem saying that we are swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight.

And so not only that we are able to understand humanity or directed by that, we also find that poetry is so very multidimensional that it also tries to give the picture of history, culture and also about the society across centuries. So, we find another quote which I would like to share with you is Pablo Neruda himself coming up with that, "And you will ask why does not his poetry speak of dreams and leaves and the great volcanoes of his native land?" And he just gives the answer in a nutshell. "Come and see the blood in the streets."

So, this way poetry could bring in politics and the real state of affairs that exist and so it becomes so very multidimensional that just it does not stop with emotional responses to love something but it tries to express the religious values, the cultural values of the society. And more than that I also find that it brings in the cathartic effect too.

So, though we stop the poem of Wordsworth,

“I wondered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;”

And nobody could really forget it and the evergreen poem, though it starts with a slight melancholic note, after that we find that it brings in fresh air to us and we are able to see the panoramic view of it. And when poetry could give us so much delight and so much knowledge about things, I feel that, I am very proud to say that it is my vocation that I am able to teach poetry and share my thoughts through.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is wonderful ma’am. So, each one has a reason for teaching poetry. One has interpreted in freedom, Professor Meena Kumari has that kind of fluid experience. So, we can call it interpretative freedom or experiential freedom that she has and here Dr. Kalvikarasi says, she is really delighted, absolutely delighted in teaching poetry as it is the condition of human beings, universal condition of human beings.

That is fine. Now, let us come to this major crux of our panel discussion today teaching of poetry. What are the ways in which you teach poetry ma’am and is there any special ways that you have?

Professor Meena Kumari: I feel strongly, anybody who teaches poetry must teach with what is to begin with what is known as rendition for poem. That plays a very important role as you render a poem, the student is listening. The way you are

rendering a poem the student should be able to understand, visualize what exactly the poet is trying to communicate.

So, I strongly believe in rendition of poem. So first they always render the poem to classroom and then I ask them like I ask them to render. Are they able to keep pace with the tone which I rendered and then I ask them what did you exactly understand, your interpretation and then there I stop and then I will go back to the poet and place him in which circumstance he wrote, which age he wrote? That is very important.

And then after placing him, the poet, I just try to have a circumference of the poem. I do not go beyond that. Of course, I speak a little bit about the poetic devices but I do not go beyond that for a student. I just give them the meaning, try to analyze the poem, the theme of the poem. So, I believe strongly in rendition of the poem.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Do you like to render a poem mam, now? Please.

Professor Meena Kumari: I have just got a couple of poems here. First, I would like to render *The Pulley* by George Herbert.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Good.

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah.

“When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
“Let us,” said he, “pour on him all we can.
Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.”

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,

Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

“For if I should,” said he,
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

“Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness,
May toss him to my breast.”

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Thank you ma'am. Yes.

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah, Yeah. That is how I render the poem and then of course I place the poet in the age and the background and then of course I explain them word by word, try to analyze the poem, tell them about theme of the poem.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay ma'am.

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Now, let us go to Professor Kalvikkarasi and listen to her on how she teaches poetry in her class. Yes ma'am.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes sir. You see when we take up the poetic text, I allow the students to go on, reading it allowed for some time, at least twice and given some time to meditate on it. And usually when I look at the dynamics in the classroom, I find that the students become more interested in anatomizing the poem, coming out with the linguistic features of it which they find it very easy with our training. But when it comes to the content of the poem, that is where the real challenge of it lies and they struggle a bit with the suggestive devices and I think that the teachers must really get into and facilitate their understanding.

And it also becomes very demanding for them because they need to understand the historical background or rather the cultural, or even the cultural background of that age and apart from that they also feel that they do not have enough practice with the approaches to poetry. So, I think the NPTEL course would really help them to look at the different approaches that are being defined so well by you Sir and where particularly they are struck with the semantic approach to it and or they are able to look at all the poetic devices and do a good work. But when it comes to the semantic part of it, their understanding demands our facilitation more there.

So, and another thing which I find is whether the students are not being adequately trained in sharpening the perspectives and whether allow with the introduction of the literary text. We could also introduce them to the literary theories (ok) down the timeline.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Like starting from Aristotle's 'Poetics' or Dande's 'Dhande Alankaram' or coming up with the 'Rasa Theory.' I think essentially, we need to also in parallel present them with the literary theories which will make them to develop or sharpen their perspectives and enjoy the multidimensional approach they would develop towards poetry.

So, I do give them lot of theories along with the introduction of the literary text and the university curriculum also must be taken to account that along with the, I mean with the social background of that age. We must also help them with the literary theories as such of how, what the nature of literature is and what could be the

parameters by which they could get on with their interpretation. It is not that we are losing much on their own interpretation. It also sources the guidelines.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Additional inputs. Okay.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Inputs. Where they will be able to fix their position and look at whether the particular poem lends itself to what kind of approach that they could take in specific. Like a poem lends itself to the feminist approach. That is, they would be able to take that stand where all the metaphors on the suggestive devices becomes very luminous for them.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: True.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: So, it is very important for them to take that position and which could be guided I think by introducing the literary theories also which I try to do in the classroom. So, it is like sort of a listening comprehension and reading comprehension for them. And so, they do a lot of work other than getting on with the other genres like novels or drama. I think students really focus more on poetry and trying to do lot of work by themselves.

And so that way it also improves their communication skills, collaborating with their peers and coming up with their ideas.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Good to hear that from you ma'am. Students are interested in analyzing poem in depth. That is good.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Now, let us move onto the next question about questions from students. What are the questions that normally you receive from students on reading poetry?

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah. The moment they listen to a poem and then after listening the interpretation of the poem, they have got common questions like what was the mood of the poet when he wrote and why did he write such a poem? Only for that we need what is known as the background study.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Professor Meena Kumari: So, we must speak about the poet, the background of the poem. For example, I was teaching Richard Cory by Edwin Arlington Robinson. So, they did not understand why there was a person like this. I just like to quote a few lines here.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Professor Meena Kumari: The poem goes this way Sir,

“Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.”

And then the poet talks about how he is such a rich man walking around. And towards the end the last stanza goes this way,

“So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.”

The students are so curious to know, why is that he was so rich.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: Okay and then why did he put a bullet? So, in that way the background studies play a very important role. That time I told them this poem was written during the economic depression. Okay!

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: True, true.

Professor Meena Kumari: When people economic growth of the country was going down and majority was in poverty and very rarely only the rich people were able to

manage and it makes them able to compare with our present situation what is happening in this pandemic also. Okay.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Professor Meena Kumari: So, we have to talk about the background. So sometimes we say about the background. They are very happy and then we discuss about the theme. In a B.A. class my teaching stops with only interpretation of a poem. okay and analysis of a poem. Whereas in a PG class the interpretation goes a little more apart from analysis. Okay. Here, they understand the content. They know the theme. They are very happy with the poet and when he was born what was the purpose of his writing and the mode of the poet. There ends.

Whereas in the PG class, we try to elaborate a little more, we bring in theories. Like when I teach a poem, can I just ask do you think this poem escorts some of the like Ma'am says about literary theory, I speak about Robert Frost, a figure a poem makes. What does he say there? A poem should begin with delight and ends with wisdom.

Does this poem begin with delight and ends with a wisdom or it bring about Allen Tate, tension in poetry? He speaks about poetry has got some tension because a little bit of a dramatic effect is there in the poem. Do this poem has got a dramatic effect? We discuss such things in PG classes.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay. What about the kind of questions that you receive from your students?

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes Sir. Actually, they have problems as I already stated, problems are rather the apprehension, whether they are able to understand the essence of the poem. So, they come up with lot of questions on that it at looks very vague and we want to know more about the background of a poem. And also, they find it very difficult to under veil the metaphors where they need additional inputs there.

So, these are the generally the difficulties they find and when I was teaching metaphysical poetry in the class with John Donne's poem, I too could feel the difficulty in them understanding the poem because 17th century metaphysical poems were too very different when we look down the ages. And how did you take it, unless

they understand the scientific temper of the 17th century. They would not be able to even understand the metaphors.

So, I always tell the students that whenever you find some heterogeneous images or dissonance in that or the discordant tone in the rendering of the poem, that is where you need to concentrate more and try to understand why the poet is particularly using this image which are rarely been found in the poems of any of the centuries. So that they could by themselves understand what is the background of that age and it also comes up with different stylistic devices and find again. It poses challenge for the students and it is quite enjoyable also for them.

Later that when we start explaining to them about the 17th century, about the scientific temper of that age and then they try to look at the poem with a different perspective. So, for example, quoting John Donne's very popular comparison of 'The Lovers to the Draftsman's Compass' and so the students would have been very much startled with the comparisons and so they go on with the dialectal mode.

And one important advantage we have even with the metaphysical poems is they have this dialectical mode, they argue by themselves I mean in the poem, and the students are able to understand it. So, the background of the poem is very important for them even to understand why such a type of metaphor had been used.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: And also, why are they coming? What is the intention of the poem? or rather the intention of the poet might not be making a very true account. But the resemblance of it which we could find in the poem, so what ultimately is the purpose of the poem? So, that is where they look at it as a kind of a puzzle which they try to do taking the historical background and taking the metaphors and why the usages like this and so it is like the complete anatomy which they perform with the poem.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is great. Now, that actually takes us to the next question of strategies in reading poems. We may learn some strategies from the critics or from other readings. In the course of teaching our own poetry, have you developed

or have you come across some kind of new strategy that you think is unique to you, that you are using in your classes?

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah! like I told you Sir, like I always introduce poetry mainly by rendition and that is, that maybe a very old way of doing it but I believe strongly in that. And of course, I try to analyze the poem and interpret the poem and talk about the poetic devices but of late what I felt and I am using a new strategy through this online classes that I try to give them some pictures of the poem.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Very good. Very good.

Professor Meena Kumari: Okay. I show them the picture of the poet and sometimes we happen to get the picture of the house where he lived in, little bit of his background and what made him write and then about the poem itself if there is some video clippings or pictures...

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is wonderful.

Professor Meena Kumari: I show all that. Okay. And they are so impressed and they remember.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: They remember me or not, they remember the poet.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: Okay. It is like that. They remember. So, this online way of teaching helps you to be a better teacher.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is good.

Professor Meena Kumari: I strongly believe that because not only the audible of our voice is there but also the pictures. So, they are having an impression on those pictures. So that, I think that is the only new strategy I am using as of now.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Very good ma'am. Yes ma'am.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes. This makes me to get reminded of one of my class where I was teaching Herbert's 'Easter Wings' and the poem as you all know had been presented as a visual structure.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: So, the spread of wings along with the poem had been written.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: And this came as a very new strategy for the students to understand but I found that many of them were able to compare that with their own native poetry where they have what we call as Kolam or Rangoli.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Oh. Yes

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: And So, the dots have been replaced by the letters and they try to compose the poetry together. So, it is whether the barrack architecture that really influence the Herbert's poetry or whether it is going to be the native style. Students were able to make such seamless comparisons and sometimes they also identify that this particular poem has more scope for translations.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Oh! I see.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: So, we allow them to translate and they try to create a blog and they try to upload their translations in the blog to get more reviews on that.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Very good.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: So, that way we also get on with the digital mode. So that the students also have that aspiration of their own publications getting on with the world.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: So, can we say that the translation is the teaching strategy that you are adopting in your classes?

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Definitely sir. Definitely sir.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That also I think addresses your problem of understanding the poems? Semantic problems?

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Poems, yes. That is what they go a lot of challenges when they translate. But sometimes they themselves come that this would be easier for them to translate and if it is in their own native tongue, they would be able to enjoy it more. So likewise, we do that.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: I believe that kind of translation is also a kind of cross-cultural current between literatures that happens.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Definitely Sir.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That will be very useful for both literatures.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yes sir. Yes. That is how the students also develop a taste for literature. Yes Sir.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Now, there are some poems that we often refer to in our teaching throughout the year, throughout the semester, throughout our career. Do you have such poems that is close to your heart, that you share with your students often, very often, even in your discussion with the friends?

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah, I generally share, many poems I share but which comes to my mind right now is 'Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost and then 'The Pulley.' Both the poems I discuss because, what I feel right now the need of the hour the student is that some sort of a moral culture must be there.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: okay? So, I strongly believe in that. So, I always talk about 'Pulley.' Okay. God has given everything to you but he is holding something. That is a piece of mind and how do you gain that? So, I make them think morally by quoting that poem.

The other poem I always encourage even a plus 2 student or a 10th standard student or a college student is 'Road Not Taken.' That is because what is happening in our society that Sir, when a child is growing up either you become an engineer or become

a doctor or you enter into IIT, things like that. They are not letting a child grow by itself developing his or her own passion.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: okay? So, I always try to tell them about Road Not Taken and I quote the last 2 lines quite often. The last 2 line which talks about take the different road. "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Professor Meena Kumari: okay? So, you must try to take, if you choose to do literature, does not mean that you must be an English teacher or English professor. If there some other passion grows alongside entering into film, or into a theatre, you can always do it.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Professor Meena Kumari: That will always make a difference. So little bit of a career counselling also I do with the help of poems.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Very good.

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Journalism, administration, civil services, there are so many career options. English literature does not prevent that student from pursuing different kind of options.

Professor Meena Kumari: Yeah, I communicate that with the help of Road Not Taken by Robert Frost.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is good. Yes ma'am. What are your favourite poems and how do you use them often?

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Yeah well, many which I often go with quoting them but particularly the poem 'Ulysses'

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Ulysses

Professor G Kalvikkarasi : which I wanted to. Yes Sir.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Ulysses which I want to... like... I would like to share the few lines. Where I could see the sense of purpose in their lives which I could share with the youngsters and so “Though much is taken, much abides;” and particularly I was impressed by this line and also the concluding part of the poem,

“One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

So, there is a very favourite phrase of me which I often recite to myself and also to the students.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: That is great. That is great. Perhaps this question can address their problem of what are the question, what are the uses of poetry. Professor

G Kalvikkarasi: Poetry.

Professor S. P. Dhanavel: Poetry has its own moral, purpose but then we have poets, critics saying that poetry may not necessarily serve a specific purpose. We are aware of that dilemma or discussion that is current in our literary circle. Still, as teachers we have a role to play in the class to guide students with the help of poetry and I hope both of you agree to that.

Professor G Kalvikkarasi: Definitely Sir.