

Poetry
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Discussion - 02 Part - 01

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Hello, welcome to our studio for this course on poetry.

Shreekumar Varma: Thank you so much.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: We are happy to have you here as a poet. Hello viewers I am happy to introduce our poet, a creative writer Shreekumar Varma. He was born in 1955, in the Trivandrum royal family. He has done his M.A and MPhil in English literature that is an added advantage for us to look at poetry from an academic perspective as well.

He has a lot of experience in journalism, publishing in different parts of India, including Bombay, and Chennai, and he has grown to become a great novelist, playwright and poet in general a creative author, one who can live on creative writing, what I see in him. And for this kind of achievement, he has won several recognitions for novels, for plays and for poetry as well.

Some of his achievements include R. K. Narayan Award for excellence in writing, Charles Wallace fellowship, it is a very prestigious fellowship for writers who go to normally this Stirling University in Scotland and stay there for some time, have their own creative writing there. He has been mentioned for this crossword book award two times, and also for this Man Asian literary prize and he has won the first prize for his play Bow of Rama in this the Hindu all India playscripts competition.

These are some of his achievements and as a jury he has been serving several competitive programmes to help select writers in different forms of writing. I am happy to welcome poet, novelist, playwright Shreekumar Varma to our studio. I hope this interaction will be very useful to you to understand, poetry, and creative writing in general. Welcome, poet Shreekumar Varma.

Shreekumar Varma: Thank you so much. So good to be here.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, I am glad to see that you have written so many poems and novels, plays and one recognition for your creative output. This is a course on poetry. So, our

questions will be more related to poetry. Let us begin with the beginning of your journey and writing poetry. How did you come to writing poetry?

Shreekumar Varma: Basically, I think it began with storytelling as a little boy I used to tell stories and then that developed and I used to write short stories and poetry was I started focusing seriously on poetry when I wrote poetry during my school and college and they were published in the college and school magazines.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Very good

Shreekumar Varma: So, the comment/ comments on the poetry after that the responses to my poems encouraged me a little more so I stayed with poetry also.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: But then the thing is I decided that this was a vast field.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True,

Shreekumar Varma: Writing was a vast field,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True,

Shreekumar Varma: And when I did get into journalism when I was with the Indian express in Bombay. So, when I got into that I realized that, every type of writing encouraged or enriched the other kind of writing.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True,

Shreekumar Varma: So, which means journalism could influence my novels, my short stories, my plays, and the poetry was the core of it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, Excellent, Excellent. So, when you got this core of poetry in your writing career, where did you apart from your college or school magazine where did you start publishing your poems?

Shreekumar Varma: It took some time, because it started with the poetry page of these magazines, those days there so many outlets for poetry, so I started with the poetry page in magazines and then in the newspaper, poetry page of newspapers, Sunday magazines and Friday papers and things so ever, then once people started seeing that and reading that they started asking me to contribute to anthologies,

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

Shreekumar Varma: So, Penguin, Puffin, all these people started, when they had the poetry anthologies. They started asking me, so it was always written for a particular thing.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Then I started my own magazine,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, Good,

Shreekumar Varma: in Madras it was briefly there, and it helped a lot of other writers as well, so there also, there was an outlet for poetry.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Poetry publication.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: okay. Now, you said about contributing to anthologies, and your own volumes.

Shreekumar Varma: No, but that is the problem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: What is the problem?

Shreekumar Varma: I never had my own book published of poetry.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Until I think last year, there was a book published with poetry, written by me and my wife.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: It was called 'Twilight Ours,' not hours but ours.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Twilight Ours.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah

Shreekumar Varma: So, I had to wait till now to have my own book and that too I am sharing it with my wife's poetry.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, That is great.

Shreekumar Varma: So, I will tell you why.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: Because I remember talking to, there was a video chat with the I think the USI's had arranged this.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And very great and very big publisher.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Who used to collaborate with Salman Rushdie. She and a few other people were there on the panel.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: One of the questions that I asked was, I also write poetry though I am a novelist and a short story writer I also write plays and poetry.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, why is it not in India alone why is it not so the publishers are not so accepting of poetry and plays?

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True.

Shreekumar Varma: As compared to the others.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Novels and short stories.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. So, they said it is all over the world. It is a phenomenon which reaches throughout the world.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, poetry and poetry need a little more.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Support,

Shreekumar Varma: Strain on your part to you know to reach there.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: That was then,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Those days I remember going to the British Council there would be a little group of 3 or 4 people sitting in one cubicle and exchanging points. Now it is the opposite.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Wherever you go, you will find poetry, you find everybody is writing poetry.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is a great, that is a good news.

Shreekumar Varma: That is not good news.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, why so?

Shreekumar Varma: That is because, when you due replicate and multiply and go on writing as a daily routine, then your poetry suffers.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. Quality suffers.

Shreekumar Varma: quality suffers.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: okay

Shreekumar Varma: So, you, there are so many of these magazines and there are so many of these you know online,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Platforms,

Shreekumar Varma: Platforms where you write poetry. So, if you keep writing poetry just for the sake of writing poetry a day, it is like having your meal.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, you should gauge so much that you are the quality of your poet poetry the observation that you should bring to it. The interior monologue suffers.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: There is no silence, it is just words.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay,

Shreekumar Varma: It is just words.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True true. It is good to see that you also have contributed to a poetry volume of 'Nonsense Poet in India.' Could you share some experience on that?

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, that is a very unique sort of thing because this was brought out by a Penguin, and they had used, Nonsense, it's a genre, which has been neglected till now, so

Satyajit Ray's father was a one of the pioneers of this form of poetry. So, they collected from various languages from Malayalam from Bengali from all over the place. And they asked for original poems from people. So, I wrote two poems I think nonsense poems. That is the very interesting thing because even though it is called nonsense poems, there is some sort of a deeper meaning to it, there is a core as I say,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: which holds it together. You cannot just write anything you want. Even, nonsense requires sense to put it together.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is nicely put. Thank you. Can you share with us some experiences of the remark's comments from editors, reviewers of your poetry, readers of your poetry?

Shreekumar Varma: I think basically, it is been a good journey for me because since I distribute my inspiration my talents into different platforms, Poetry is a very sacred place there.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, That is great.

Shreekumar Varma: So, I take a lot of effort to wait and write, there is one platform where I have to, where they demand poetry every month,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: which I do.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: But even that, sort of, you know, takes care of my the churning that is necessary to come out,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: With poetry, so I think it is a been a good journey and the commentary and the feedback has been generally good. That is why they keep asking me because I do not go about looking for a,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Publisher...

Shreekumar Varma: For a publisher or a book to write my poetry so they keep coming to me as far as poetry is concerned.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, I think that is a good sign.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is great. That takes us to the next question, what sustains you as a poet? You have been a novelist, a playwright but for this you are paying some special care, what sustains you as a poet?

Shreekumar Varma: In one of the poems, I think, I will read it later

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Tell you about it. I have written that 'the silence of words is more important than the words itself.'

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Very good.

Shreekumar Varma: So, when you are writing a novel, you are going the whole hog you are creating an another world, you are talking about characters and you are creating an entire infrastructure there, and short stories, you sort of tone it down and bring it down to one incident, incident or so and play it is something that you are watching, audience is sitting there and watching so you have to get all those things, but poetry, it is something which is between you and your what is being written.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: There is nobody else in the picture.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: The poet and the word,...

Shreekumar Varma: Yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, the, not even the word just communicates and then it evaporates.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Then what happens is, each reader can make what sense, he or she wants to from that.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And even one particular reader, if he or she takes it in one sense, as time goes on as they grow older, they see a different part of the poem or different facet to the poem,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Dimension...

Shreekumar Varma: Dimension to the poem. So, that is what should be in a poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: See, if you crowd it with ideas and concepts and words without giving a space between lines, then the point is done for, it becomes a monument, it becomes there unbreakable. But if you leave something for the reader to take home...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: That is what enhances the quality of each poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is good, that is great. Now, you have been able to sustain as a poet some difficulties, some problems, challenges you may have faced as a poet in writing in publishing and getting an audience for your poetry. Could you tell us about some challenges?

Shreekumar Varma: I think I have had it pretty easy. I do not know about other people but somehow or the other maybe because I was on this, I was a journalist, And I was on that platform already.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: As my job.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: okay.

Shreekumar Varma: I think that helped me and, and it is been a long journey,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, it is.

Shreekumar Varma: So, and I was not very persistent or insistent that I should be published. See people nowadays when they write a novel when they start writing in novel, they called me up and say I am writing this novel where can I have it published. I did not have any such,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Model or,...

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, I just started writing, and I stayed true to that journey and only after that, did I look for publishing or an outlet or ask people about where I can publish. So, that staying with that journey helped me, I think. And this thing of looking around, You know, using or doing a play and everything you know, working off each other, but that also I think helped me a lot in this.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Is there any element from novel or play that you have brought into your poetry?

Shreekumar Varma: Absolutely, basically it is the other way around.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: oh, Yeah. Ha.. ha.. ha..

Shreekumar Varma: From that core of inspiration which forms a poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay

Shreekumar Varma: And what happens is now like I used to tell my students; creativity is something like electricity. It is always there,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: But when you sit down to write when you are ready for it to switch on the light and then you channel it into a particular thing, a light or an air conditioner or a fan or whatever you want water, or whatever. So, that electricity that creativity is running through all the time, and your mind is always active, your heart is always beating.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, It is.

Shreekumar Varma: So, that process is going on. But when you sit down to write, then begins the art of creation. So, there are two things. One is the writing one is the inspiration so I would say you divide it into two things, the heart and the art.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, what comes from the art? But that need not necessarily be readable,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, That is right, that is right,

Shreekumar Varma: to a reader. So, what you need is the art to form it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: And put it in a particular You know, frame,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Shape,

Shreekumar Varma: Frame or shape, so that the reader can also identify many readers can identify,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True true.

Shreekumar Varma: Keeping that silence in mind.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, As you said earlier, many people are, lots of people are writing poetry today. Is there any piece of tape or advice that you want to give to other upcoming poets?

Shreekumar Varma: See the problem is everybody is giving advices and You know. exchanging tools and techniques and things like that.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: But the thing is you read other poets.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Earlier I was also inspired by poetry, poets, other poets much earlier in my life, but you have to keep away all that when you go into serious writing, because all these people form a base, form your foundation,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: And then your building starts here.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: Once that foundation is ready. And then you put your own bricks together and your own architecture together and then you build your palaces of fantasy or whatever.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is fantastic. That takes us to the next question on the model poets that you may have had in your mind, when you start writing your poems. Who are those influencers could you tell us?

Shreekumar Varma: I really do not remember,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: ha, ha, ha

Shreekumar Varma: Because other than the poets who I was taught Keats and words worth and the usual names whom I started out with romantic poetry, and that that freshness during that young age, I think we had it much more than the people now, they are sort of in a, in a prison, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: They have their phone and they have the online, the screen, and they have inputs coming in from every direction. There you go and you explored, nature or the world of people, you found out things for yourself. So that gave you that quality of, you know, which touched came straight to your heart, you did not need a screen in between, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: For your ideas and your thoughts and your inspiration.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. When you are called a poet, you have a feeling. Similarly, when you are called a novelist or a playwright, you may have some kind of feeling. What is that feeling? I call it kick, or some click. Is there any feeling like that in you as a poet?

Shreekumar Varma: That kick, the only thing is that the reader should not give that kick.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: No, no, you must feel it as a poet.

Shreekumar Varma: No, the thing is, I think, basically that what you call a kick or click or whatever comes when you get a feedback. Sometimes afterwards. For example, when you are writing a novel, you are seated in a lonely place in your room and you are creating an entire world. But later, after the book is reached the audience, you hear from somewhere maybe the internet or somebody telling you or during your classroom interaction somebody tells you about a scene that they are appreciating, that works.

As far as a play is concerned, there are no barriers, you get it instantly when the play is done, play they have produced the play and you are seated along with the audience in the darkened room, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: The reaction the response is instantaneous,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: yeah, It is it is.

Shreekumar Varma: it is immediate. So, the laughter, or the silence, or the, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Claps, ...

Shreekumar Varma: Everything is immediate, so you know the reaction so, that is the kick.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. okay

Shreekumar Varma: It is not the label of, see if they recognize me and say you are the novelist, you are the playwright, that is just a little mask like the ones we wear nowadays.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: It is a kind of identity.

Shreekumar Varma: It is not even an identity; it is just a maybe a label.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: Which you can take off and throw, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Is it?

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, the more you are ready to take of that label, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And throw it away.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: The more genuine you are as a writer because I think lot of people go around with that, or label and that sustains them. It is not the label that should sustain you, it is the writing. Writing makes me write more.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Excellent, excellent.