The Book Launch

The book launch was going very well. Though it had started late, not unusual for such events, none of the several hundred guests had left for dinner, their literary appetite fortified by endless rounds of canapés, and glasses of wine or whisky. Thiagarajan the translator stood nervously by the side of the podium, while Rina went on ecstatically about the book, the writing, the depth of social comment, the persona of the author coming through despite the passage of the better part of a century, and how the woman of the early twentieth century could speak directly to a post-modern audience, cutting through veils of imposed seclusion. The author's sexuality could be discerned through the text like fish darting under darkling waters. With this fling of poetic imagination, Rina took a sip of water from the glass beside her, and declared she was confident the book would be a long-term bestseller and the star performer that year of her publishing house.

"But I must not forget to thank the translator," she said turning kindly towards Thiagarajan, who took an instinctive step backwards, "though he assures me it was a labour of love for him to bring his grandmother's manuscript before the public gaze. Tell me, Tyagu," her voice dropping to a caressing pitch, "it must have been very hard work to translate your granny's Tamil into modern English?"

He shuffled his feet and seemed to speak to his shoes. She stepped back and putting a kindly arm round his shoulders, dragged him to the mike.

"I am going to request Mr. Thiagarajan to give us a glimpse of the struggles he went through when he took up this monumental task. Discovering the faded manuscript in an old tin box was an act of God – nothing less – but then, to decipher the writing, convert the old-fashioned Tamil into vibrant English prose, and let – let his grandmother speak directly to us about the life of a woman of her times – this is a masterly work of translation!"

She pushed him in front of the mike. He coughed, and tapped the mike. It made no sound at all. A technician ran up and there was a huddle round the instrument. The technician tapped the mike, and it boomed into life, he said a few loud 'hellos' into it, and then satisfied, ran back to his corner.

Thiagarajan started slowly in a mumbling voice. People strained forward in their seats, and smiled encouragingly. Yes, the discovery was a Godsend, at first he could hardly make out anything, and some of the paper just crumbled away. A distressed look passed through the audience like a Mexican wave, but he saved the bulk of it, he said, exchanging reassuring glances with the group. He remembered as a child how his grandmother would go to the open terrace of the house after the midday meal with her notebook and pen, and gaze out into the distance past the unending rice fields till inspiration came to her. No one else had been interested, but he had been her favourite grandchild, and he would go up sometimes with her and ask her what she was writing. She would just smile and say one day she would give him her book to read. But that was

years ago, and he had forgotten all about it, till he was rummaging in the old house in the village, prior to selling it, and he by chance came upon her notebooks.

It was a magical story, a story of a chance discovery of a rare manuscript, and the media made the most of it. Print media were not too troublesome, a few snaps of him signing the book, and the info on the dust jacket was enough for them. But TV stations were far more demanding. He was seated in different corners of little rooms opening out of the Moghul Durbar Hall of the hotel were the book launch was being held, and he was told to repeat everything he had said before. Every TV station wanted a special angle, but the interviewers all asked the same question. He desperately tried to remember amusing or dramatic incidents about his grandmother's life. Finally he was done, or they had to pack up and go somewhere else. He staggered back into the huge hall, thirsty, hungry, and tired.

Rina bore down on him immediately. "It's going splendidly," she said in a stage whisper. "Look at that table! Not a single book left unsold! I want to introduce you to Professor Gwen Fawcett of the University of Queensland, Australia. Talk to her, I'll get you a plate of something. Here!" Rina signaled imperiously, and two waiters came running up, one carrying a tray full of glasses with orange juice, coconut water, and colas, while another hovered behind with napkins and a plate with two samosas and a chocolate brownie.

Behind the waiters stood a thin tall woman, smiling at him through thick glasses and a set of wrinkles. He took a glass of orange juice, the plate of food and a napkin, and smiled weakly at the woman.

"I'm Gwen – Gwen Fawcett from Brisbane, Mr. Thiagarajan," she said nasally, sounding as awkward as he left. "Why don't we sit down here, by this table? You must be tired, but I'm sure you are very happy. It's been a great success."

Rina had bustled off. He was thankful for that at least. He tried to drink the juice, but then had a fit of coughing as a bit of a samosa went the wrong way. When he surfaced from the napkin with a mumbled apology, he saw that the woman had extracted some papers from her bag and was pressing them on him. With some hesitation, he put the glass and the plate on the nearby table, folded the napkin, and reluctantly took the papers.

"The School of Culture Studies of the University of Queensland will host an International Conference on Translation," Professor Fawcett was saying. "I would very much like to invite you to be a Keynote Speaker in our Third Session – the one on Dravidian languages." A long finger pointed to the relevant page in the sheaf she had handed to him.

Yes, he saw that the third session was on Dravidian languages with a lot of blanks against the names of speakers. He turned to the glossy cover, a two-tone affair with a snake curving round the title which read 'The Changeling Word: *translations, meanings, messages, media*' Her card pinned to a corner said she was head of culture studies.

“That is, if you can spare the time next July?” She seemed to be quite humble about her request.

He assured her of his availability, and she assured him that all expenses would be taken care off, including a modest honorarium of a thousand dollars or so for a keynote speaker. She seemed to fade into the background as Rina once again came forward masterfully to take charge of him. He reluctantly left his unfinished plate and glass on the table, and followed her. She linked her arm through his, and he noticed for the first time that she was an inch or so taller than him. He must look like a scarecrow beside her, he thought, with his thin gray straggly hair bobbing alongside her carefully brushed raven wings.

“Tyagu, I have some very good news for you,” she said plunking him down in a chair in one of those little rooms off the great hall that the hotel seemed to be littered with. The door shut softly behind him, and he saw a mustached man in a full-sleeved white shirt and tie come forward with another file of papers.

“This is my Marketing Manager,” said Rina, failing to name him, “he’s brought the contract for you to sign about your book of short stories. Now that your grandmother’s book is such a success, we all think we can make a little money on your own first book.”

They were both smiling down at him. He signed everything in a daze, without trying to read a word. He had been rejected by everyone, repeatedly, for years. But something in him had kept him going doggedly, writing and submitting, and filing away the rejection slips. On the nth visit to Aksharmala Publishing, Rina had swept into the sub-editor’s office, where he usually had his regretful dismissal, and introducing herself as editor-in-chief, had told him firmly that his style was out of date, that his writing could not be sold, and that maybe he should try and write a good book about gardening, since people liked to read a book about gardening written by an old man who looked experienced. And now, his first book of stories was going to be published!

When he came out dazed, out of the little cubicle, where a new life as a writer had been granted to him, he found an old friend, who had been hanging around modestly at the back waiting for a chance to congratulate him.

“You want a lift home, Tyagu?” asked Rina carelessly, as she turned away with her colleague. He stammered out that he would spend a few minutes with his friend, Gopalan, whom he hadn’t seen for years, but before he could introduce him, she was gone with a wave of her hand.

The great hall was almost clear of people. A few stood around in knots. A few students were at the long tables eating for all they were worth even as the staff cleared away. Among them was a fat man in a dark suit, whose stomach fell over his trousers, feeding himself rather ferociously. Someone was switching off the light from the great chandeliers. His friend had propelled him out of the hall, and into the passage.

"Well, well, Tyagu, fancy your turning into a great writer in your old age," said Gopalan pleasantly. "I know a nice corner in the 'Gardenia', come, come with me, I want to stand you a drink. I am sure you need one, several in fact."

Gopalan steered him into the bar of the hotel, and they found a table by the window overlooking the rose garden in the courtyard. In the dark of the night, the bulbous roses looked black or gray, except when a bush was backlit by the occasional fairy light.

"I know you don't like hard liquor," Gopalan was saying, "but the occasion calls for something better than beer. Let's have wine – no! this is on me, I have a famous friend, and I'm going to make the most of it!"

When the wine was brought, Thiagarajan could just see that the label was French, but his friend gave him no time to ponder over the cost, as he chatted while he poured out a glass. "Your notations were the best in the department," said Gopalan, "in fact all of us admired the literary quality of your remarks. Pity they were wasted on an ignorant government. Cheers!"

They sipped and talked of old times, not all that romantic or exciting, but the distance of time imposed its own colour over events they would have regarded as dreary or petty thirty –no, forty years ago! Memories of idiotic bosses swam into their rosette view accompanied by much laughter as the evening progressed, or of the occasional comely female officer, made beautiful by time and spoken of in guarded terms of praise, for they were both gentlemen of the older sort, naturally. Gopalan had been an early friend in the service, but who had migrated soon after to the United Nations, a big paycheck, and casual foreign travel. Thiagarajan had never grudged him all that success, though sometimes he had wistfully wondered why such magical things had never come his way. After retirement, plucking up courage and refusing the job offered by a wealthy corporate of being a sort of superior office boy in touch with government, he had embarked upon a late literary career, thinking the hardest part of it was to write. He had much to learn in his 'troisième âge.' He knew his was no challenge to the skills of Tolstoy or Dickens, but he had read enough to know that what he wrote was better than most of what he got to read nowadays. And yet he never got beyond the junior-most sub, who would dismiss him with a scarcely concealed yawn. Government service had taught him fortitude and endurance, and the knowledge that skill and honest work are rarely repaid with justice. But still it was irksome to be consistently denied recognition by his inferiors.

"I didn't know your grandmother ever wrote," said Gopalan opening another bottle of excellent Bourdeax, as he had been taught through that evening. "I remember her as a rather – how shall I put it – suppressed woman."

"Oh, she wrote all right, pages of stuff. Maybe I get it from her. Often wondered."

"It was most fortunate you discovered her manuscript."

Thiagarajan leaned back and sipped the wonderful dark ruby wine. “I never did. I searched, but never did. Either she destroyed it all while she was alive, or, who knows, my nephew may have burnt it. Crass idiot, comes of living a life of rural idiocy I suppose.” He drank again to remove the memory of an unloved nephew from his mind.

Gopalan was looking at him in a peculiar manner. “But my dear chap, you translated her, remember? That’s what this evening was all about.”

“No, I didn’t,” said Thiagarajan stoutly. “I wrote it all myself. Mind you, I brought her into my mind’s eye, kept her there firmly, and wrote.”

“But, but, but – why didn’t you say so, why didn’t you say it is your book, damn it, why – I mean…”

“No one would ever have published me, that’s why,” said Thiagarajan cutting his friend’s stammer short. “You don’t think I didn’t think of it? I did, and knew immediately that no one would see the book except an asinine sub, and that too between dipping into soft porn and chick lit. I know the scene, Goppy, believe you me, I do.”

“My God, it’s a swindle!” exclaimed Gopalan, much taken with the wonder of it.

“Yes, it is,” said Thiagarajan unperturbed.

Time passed, with each man lost in his own thoughts.

“Old boy, you are running a frightful risk,” said Gopalan recovering at long last. “Someone will want to see the manuscript, put it into a museum or – or – publish a facsimile or something.”

“Yes, I know,” said Thiagarajan dourly. “It sort of got out of hand. I just wanted to test the water, so to speak, see if anyone would even look at it. When Rina herself, y’know, Rina of Aksharamala, called me up within two days and went on about how brilliant it was, well, I sort of let it happen. I wanted it to happen. And I am not sorry.”

“Quite.”

The silence was broken again by Gopalan. “Now that you have written the book, you can rewrite the whole thing in Tamil, can’t you, using old paper, watered ink, that sort of thing?”

Thiagarajan looked up sorrowfully. “I can’t write in Tamil, Goppy, I can’t! And I dare not trust anyone else to do it, either.”

“What will you do?”

"Oh, live with all this success, rather splendidly, I suppose, till – till I am caught out. Other people have faked things, paintings and antiques and stuff, I am not the first one."

They drank their wine in silent meditation.

"Oh, I've got it! The Ram Reddy Preemptive!" cried Gopalan suddenly, slapping his thigh in glee.

Thiagarajan was bemused. "Which Ram Reddy? Who you talking about? Oh! That fellow? What an operator, I can tell you a story or two about him, Goppy – when was it now? Late sixty-four? No, it was January sixtyfive…"

Gopalan had come round the table and was gripping his arm. "Remember that enquiry about that cement contract? Never happened because that wing of the secretariat went up in flames burning all the papers! That's what we will do!"

Thiagarajan sat up alarmed. "Hang on, you are not going to set fire to my house!"

"No, no, no! Old boy, have some sense. We take the old faded manuscript with us to – to – Bangalore – yes, to Bangalore, to see if it can be restored by experts. Make much of the papers at the airport, so everyone remembers. Reach Bangalore on a Sunday. Go for a picnic by the river, take it along to read over. Careless cigarette, it's all burnt before we old fogies notice anything is amiss. Priceless loss! Saddened return! How's that?"

"You think it will work?" asked Thiagarajan.

Gopalan slapped him on the shoulder. "Of course it will. Works all the time in India! Who cares? Rina has her English book out. You are the only one who will be sad to have lost a priceless manuscript that could have fetched a lot of money some day at Christie's. I shouldn't wonder if you refused to have anything to do with me after the incident!"

On that note, Gopalan signaled to the bar manager who seemed to know him quite well. After a few quick transactions with him, the friends left together to find their cars in the darkness outside.

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December 24, 2009