

# Tea Talk

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By any definition, the elegantly produced book, *Tea: A Concoction of Dissonance – Poetry and Art* is an intriguing poetic and visual intervention. It presents sixty short poems written in Tamil by P. Ahilan and Geetha Sukumaran ably translated into English by Vidhya Sreenivasan accompanied by a series of thirty somber paintings of Vaideki.

The short format of the poems brings to mind epigram as well as the Japanese Haiku formats, which I always thought were far more difficult to master as poetic genres, given that an idea has to be expressed, briefly and sometimes curtly, but ideally without compromising the poetic sensibility of the works.

Sukumaran and Ahilan have addressed this challenge well. Very clearly, it is a collective enterprise, which would not have had its present personality if any of the collaborators were missing from the effort.

## Power of words

I find the collection's bilingual approach politically very sensible as someone who believes in not only the power of words, but in the power of rendering entire experiences and ideas from one language to another as well.

One of the main cultural contributions of the Tamil Diaspora in recent times is its effort to bring Tamil language creative output via numerous translations, most obviously in English, thereby ensuring these writings are accessible to others who do not have Tamil language skills.

This collection can be located squarely in the midst of this sense of politics. As Walter Benjamin once noted, "it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work."

This is what Sreenivasan has done by making Ahilan's and Sukumaran's musings reach a much wider and

global readership. Translation is not only about transferring a specific structure of meanings from one language to another. It is also about creating a 'new' work in the form of the translation, which is essentially a liberating act.

That is, liberating ideas locked in one language and allowing them to flow into the torrent of another. This is what Anthony Burges noted when he said, "translation is not a matter of words only" but also "a matter of making intelligible a whole culture." I believe this is what Ahilan and Sukumaran have done with the aid of Sreenivasan.

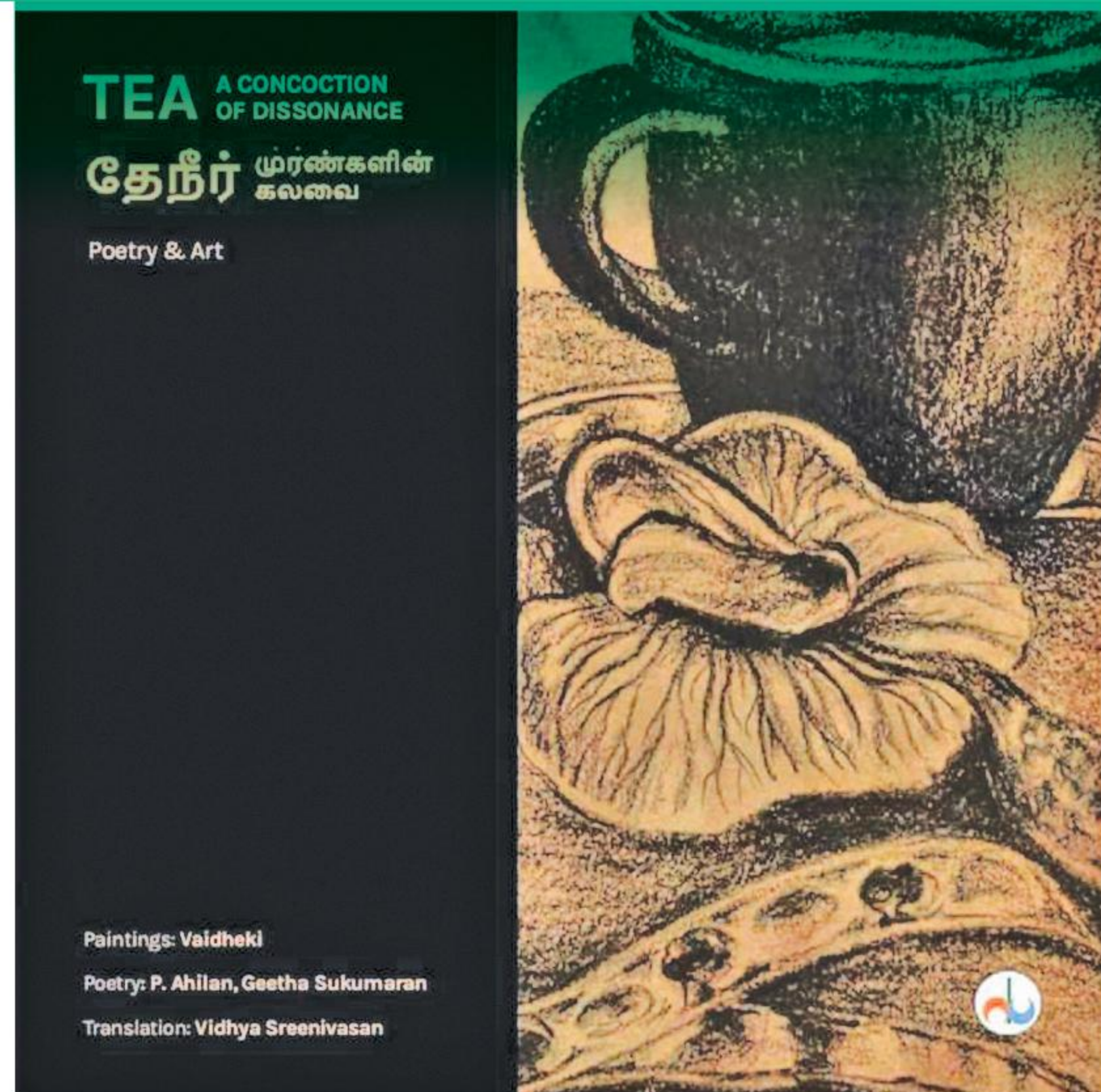
As the title suggests, the collection's point of departure and final point of arrival is tea. Without this obsession on tea, this book will not exist. But this is not a simple venturing into the worlds and tastes of tea.

Instead, tea works as a metaphor and a complex path to talk about multiple forms of politics, sociality and being. In his preface, Shash Trevett describes this effort as "beautifully parceled snapshots of life." The themes embedded in these snapshots of life addressed by the two poets in their sixty poems range from what appears to be mundane recollections of having tea to politics of violence, exploitation and the diasporic experience among many others, but always with a detectable degree of subtlety.

When Ahilan writes the following lines in his third poem, it is not only about drinking tea, but also about life and its fragility:

*"His failing life  
he drowns in tea.  
The residual words,  
flies, swarm over."*

Similarly, Sukumaran's fifth poem captures with a great degree of nuance the hopes, dreams, and anxieties of the diasporic experience, which in different versions have also been narrated to me many times by immi-



grants in the United States to UK to France to Germany, and Japan.

*"California, Singapore, London:  
In all parts,  
bodies gripping teacups search  
for familiar curves of bone,  
folds of skin,  
for remnants of home  
welling in their eyes."*

## Pitiful condition

Ahilan's eighth poem captures in eight short lines the entire spectrum of the politics, history, life and continuing predicament of Lanka's tea estate workers whose pitiful condition still remains so despite the political representation of the community in the country's Parliament and local and national politics:



*"O beautiful hill country!  
Where white hands  
raise cups of red-tinged  
tea merrily,  
and leeches feed on earth-hued  
bodies  
To fertilise tea leaves!"*

Sukumaran's fourth poem deals with memory and trauma in the context of rape, with the kind of subtlety one is not used to when the same incidents are reported in South Asia's popular press, where trauma becomes a spectacle:

*"I brought my fingers to  
her trembling fingers  
which grasped the teacup  
embittered by  
the melting memories of the  
body.  
'To them, corpses are superior*

**WHAT I HAVE DONE ABOVE, IS NOT TO PROVIDE A REVIEW OF THIS COLLECTION, BUT INSTEAD TO PROVIDE SOME SENSE OF IT, OR TO TAKE THE METAPHOR OF TEA THAT THE POETS HAVE USED FURTHER, TO OFFER A TASTE OF THE TEA THEY HAVE MADE**

*to a woman who has been raped,  
she said."*

But these poems are not always about social issues or politics. Quite often, they are not, and are about what seems to be mundane quotidian thoughts, and fleeting recollections. But there can well be more to these, which can only be deciphered fully with the residual intervention of the poets themselves. See for instance, Sukumaran's sixteenth poem:

*"Oh, we never could have  
that cup of red tea  
that splashes at the bottom."*

It may well be about missing a date for tea with a friend, but it can also be something much more coded and therefore not immediately apparent. Similarly, when Ahilan penned the following words in his fourteenth poem, it could simply mean what is actually said, or a specific memory he has in his mind which he has decided to encrypt as it moves into the public domain.

*"In a world with no one,  
tea is my companion."*

What I have done above, is not to provide a review of this collection, but instead to provide some sense of it, or to take the metaphor of tea that the poets have used further, to offer a taste of the tea they have made.

As far as I am concerned, this is not a book to be reviewed in the cold. Such an approach will do injustice to the collection.

## Sometimes despair

Instead, what it presents to us is a series of poems to be read, thought through, reflect and enjoy and sometimes despair.

The collection's creative personality owes much to artist Vaidheki's subtle but arresting still life paintings. Hers is not a secondary narrative to that of the two poets. Her paintings are not mere decorative additions to the written text as images are often used in a world dominated by the written word.

Instead, beyond the two poetic narratives created by Sukumaran and Ahilan, Vaidheki creates a third independent narrative visually that strengthens the book's discursive potential.

As she outlines in her note, 'Drawing Tea,' "moments of drinking tea are both personal and meditative" to her in the context of which she is moved towards "an act of creativity." These works of art are the result of that creativity.

But these still-life works are certainly not still, stoic or without emotion. They too move along with the words of the two poets to create the rhythm, movement, sense and politics embedded in the entire creative enterprise.

As she notes, "the fluidity of life has been encapsulated in the still life lighting and arrangement in my art."

The fourth and final narrative in the collection is of course Sreenivasan's translations, to which I have already referred to at the beginning. Seen in this sense, I see *Tea: A Concoction of Dissonance – Poetry and Art* as an amalgamation of four narratives by Ahilan, Sukumaran, Vaidheki and Sreenivasan, which together weave a very palatable collection of poetic experience both poetically and visually. It is to be read and seen, not to be analysed.