

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I am neither a bystander nor a private individual. I am always involved (as a writer) in everything happening around me. In my neighborhood, a few houses away, a mother was hitting a girl; that was when the story Agni Pravesam was born . . .

Jayakanthan in *Kumudam Magazine*

Fifty years ago Author Jayakanthan published a short story, *Agni Pravesam (Trial by Fire)*¹, in *Ananda Vikatan*, a Tamil weekly. It had a simple plot and only three characters, all nameless. The incident described in the story could have taken place in any society or any city suburb; thus it embraced a universal theme.

Agni Pravesam is the most controversial of Jayakanthan's short stories; it dealt with the harrowing experience of a thirteen-old girl who falls a victim to a sexual predator; like any normal woman, the girl's mother is horrified by the dishonor the girl has brought on the family, even thinks of scorching her to death and then, killing herself. But, as a loving mother and one imbued with humanity, she offers advice to the girl how to handle her predicament, and get on with her life. The mother gives the daughter a bath, vigorously scrubs her body, and tells her: "You are now purified. You harbored no sinful thoughts before this accident, and now you are, again, free from any wrongdoing. You must treat this unfortunate incident as a bad dream and, in future, be wary of strangers."

This narrative has allusion to the episode in *Ramayana* where *Sita* undergoes a purification ritual by entering into a sacrificial fire when her husband *Rama* accuses her of being 'tainted' due to her confinement in an enemy camp. What moves us in *Agni Pravesam* is the anguish and despair of a helpless mother struggling to make the best of the situation and instilling in her daughter the courage to go on with her life.

The mother's advice to the daughter is explicit and direct: the girl has committed no sin and she should also believe, deep from her heart, that she's free from any stain; when married, she must, with no reservation or hesitation, submit

herself to her future husband. Under no circumstances, the mother warns the daughter, should she ever reveal the episode to anyone – no exceptions - because no outsider, like her own mother, would ever understand her.

These are the words spoken with empathy and concern by a compassionate mother to her daughter, but the critics condemned the author for 'spreading wrong values' among the reading public.

Some critics chose to write their own sequels to *Agni Pravesam* 'sanitizing' its ending. In one such version, the girl commits suicide. That was, apparently, an attempt to 'save' the family honor.

Here is how Jayakanthan answered that critic:

"He has no qualms in killing her because she is not his daughter; she's someone - aloof and remote - in his imagination. As her creator, I have empathy for her. A loss to my character is a personal loss to me."

It is worthwhile revisiting some of the other questions from his detractors and Jayakanthan's point-by-point rebuttal.

Why did the author let the predator off the hook?

"Here we are dealing with a situation where a girl and her mother are facing a crisis. The mother offers hope and a new life to the daughter. So, my story centers on the girl.

I want to remind my readers that what I write are essentially 'problem-stories.' They are about the real, hard encounters in peoples' lives; I have never written a single sentence to entertain my readers."

The girl committed a sin; what's her punishment?

The girl committed no sin. I am willing to defend her in any primitive court of drum-head justice.

Finally, Jayakanthan came with his own sequel – a novel - titled *SILA NERANGALIL SILA MANITHARGAL* (SNSM). He elaborates his sentiments in the sequel through his *alter ego* - a character named RKV.

SNSM won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1972 and was later made into a successful movie.

I call my translation *The Times of their Lives*. I have posted it in two parts.

¹ Click here for the short story *Trial by Fire*

I urge the reader to get familiar with the short story *Trial by Fire* first because it prepares the reader to fully appreciate the author's imaginative power and mastery in developing full blooded characters in his sequel. Jayakanthan has stated Ganga is his favorite female character.

Again, I would like to thank Deepa Lakshmi, Jayakanthan's daughter, for her encouragement to my efforts to translate her father's works for publication in United States.

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