

## FOREWORD

**F**or modern Tamil, Jayakaanthan is not only one of the most popular and controversial writers; he is in many ways the most significant prose writer of the 20th century. Perhaps better than any other writer, he is able to reproduce accurately the speech of many different classes and kinds of people. This enabled him, at the beginning of his career, to write realistic novels and stories that appealed especially to leftists who wished to remake society. As time went on, he distanced himself from orthodox Marxism and realism and began to concentrate on conflicts and issues he found in the extremely conservative society of Tamilnadu. It is from this period that the three novellas in this collection are drawn.

As his writing evolved, Jayakaanthan did not lose his ability to reproduce the way people talk, but he augmented this talent with an ability to think in a non-linear way. Much of Tamil popular writing is entirely predictable and sentimental -- not unlike such writing in most other languages. Jayakaanthan found himself surprising his readers' expectations by adding unorthodox or unforeseen elements to his characters and his situations. His approach — and what will happen in his stories — is never predictable. We see, for example, the orthodox Brahmin in *Brahmopadesam*, with his blind reliance on tradition, actually breaking that tradition while he claims to be upholding it by making a non-Brahmin into a Brahmin. Jayakaanthan makes us see tradition in an entirely new way -- not as a mindless repetition of rituals, doctrine and *mantras*, but as a valid way of encountering and experiencing the world, a way that allows

for newness in the most unexpected ways.

As Jayakaanthan leads his readers through these unanticipated changes, he challenges their conventional views — he managed to generate controversy among virtually every group, whether the extremely conventional orthodox Brahmin community or the Communists. He simply refuses to see anything in the ways people are accustomed to. For him, prostitutes become fascinating and worthy human beings (*The Ungrammatical Poem*), orthodox Brahmins are unwitting innovators (*Brahmopadesam*), and seemingly unorthodox, undisciplined people give unwelcome insights to those who live ordered lives (*Reminiscences*).

In these three brilliant and important novellas, we see Jayakaanthan at the period that many consider his finest. No longer a writer of the sort of realistic pieces praised by the Communists, he has become a writer who intentionally subverts standard categories and ideas. This subversion was something new in Tamil literature, especially in the extent to which Jayakaanthan carried it. There is no character so evil or bad that he cannot see good in him, no character so good that he does not have some bad. In this way, ironically, Jayakanthan's writing became even more "realistic" than it had been during his orthodox leftist period, for he learned to show how people really act and think, and how virtually all people live with some false images of themselves. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Jayakaanthan is one of the most controversial — and popular — writers in modern Tamil. What he has to say is always interesting and relevant to people's lives.

Andy Sundaresan has translated these three novellas with scrupulous accuracy and care into flowing, readable English.

Jayakanthan's ideas and feelings are carried over into English, a language quite different from Tamil, with extraordinary faithfulness to the original. Those who can not read the works of this important writer who is central to modern Tamil writing, now have an opportunity to come to know him well in English.

Prof. George Hart.  
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George Hart is Professor of Tamil at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his PhD from Harvard in Sanskrit and Indian Studies and has taught Tamil and South Indian culture for over 40 years. His works include translations from *Sangam* literature and *Kampan* (many in collaboration with Hank Heifetz) and investigations into the culture of the *Sangam* age and South Indian origins for many Sanskrit conventions found in *Kalidasa* and later Sanskrit.

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Prof. George Hart at the International Tamil Conference in Coimbatore, India in June, 2010