

Made in Heaven  
and other stories  
by Jayakanthan



**Made in Heaven  
and Other Stories**

**JAYAKANTHAN**

**Translated from Tamil  
by  
Andy Sundaresan**

# **MADE IN HEAVEN AND OTHER STORIES**

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**ALSO BY ANDY SUNDARESAN**

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**TRIAL BY FIRE(2000)**

**TILL DEATH DO US PART(2005)**





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## About Author Jayakanthan

**D**handapani Jayakanthan was born in Cuddalore, India in 1934 and grew up in Madras (now called Chennai). At the age of twelve, he joined a commune. Like many other intellectuals in the thirties, Jayakanthan saw in the Soviet experiment the only hope and alternative to fascism. He became a member of the Communist Party in 1952 but left it in disillusionment in 1964—the year when the Communist movement was heading toward a split. Written in Tamil, one of the richest languages in India, Jayakanthan's early works mainly concerned with the working class as revealed in his short stories and novels. Among the latter, '*Unnaiyppol Oruvan*' (Someone Like You) was made into a successful movie and received the President's Award.

The period 1964-88 may be called the 'time of genius' when the author produced several first-rate short stories, novellas and novels. They reveal the rich variety of his scenes and characters and his remarkable talent for invention. Probably no other writer presents such dazzling pen-portraits of Indian, albeit, Tamil characters or so profound a study of human condition—the lofty and the majestic as well as the base and lowly—with an affirmation: 'I sing the glory of life!' His ability to transform the realm of the ordinary into moments of empathy, beauty and nobility is what makes Jayakanthan so accessible and popular with generations of readers both in India and increasingly abroad.

In March 2005 Jayakanthan received the distinguished Jnanapith Award for his 'outstanding contribution towards the shaping of Indian literature,' and 'his deep, sensitive understanding of human nature.' Jayakanthan is only the second Tamil writer to receive that honor.

In 1996 Jayakanthan became a Fellow of the Indian Sahitya Academy. In presenting him the title the President of the Academy remarked that Jayakanthan, speaking the oldest language in the world, was the youngest to receive such an honor. The Tamil writer was 62 at that time. He is also the recipient of awards from the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil University of Tanjore. Some of Jayakanthan's works have been translated into English, Ukrainian, Hindi, Telugu and other languages.

Critics have hailed the Tamil literary scene in the Sixties as the 'Age of Jayakanthan.' Jayakanthan's enormous literary output includes 200 short stories, 35 novellas, 15 full novels and 15 collections of essays, including Romain Roland's biography of Mahatma Gandhi that he translated into Tamil. His works have been republished in a collection of 12 volumes.

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For Nannu, with thanks  
for inspiration



## A Note from Jayakanthan

**M**y friend Andy Sundaresan has perceptively reviewed my writings and assembled a collection of short stories under the title “Jayakanthan On Marriage” and translated these stories into English. I thank him on behalf of Tamil literature for his creative work.

I recall gratefully the release of an anthology of my short stories entitled “Trial by Fire” during my visit to US a few years ago. I find it appropriate to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Hart for the valued Foreword he had penned at that time.

My warm good wishes to Andy Sundaresan who has regard for me and my writings, to his family and to my many Indo-American friends.

My good friend Dr. K.S. Subramanian who has translated into English some of works has contributed a Foreword to this book. When I express my thanks to him, I am not fulfilling a mere formality.

This translation gives me joy and satisfaction.

D. Jayakanthan

15th January, 2005

Chennai



# Foreword

**J**ayakanthan is widely acclaimed as the most eminent Tamil creative writer of the second half of the twentieth century. Any attempt to make his writings accessible to a wider readership through English translation is laudable. Andy Sundaresan's volume of Jayakanthan's stories, in this context, is a welcome contribution.

Jayakanthan's creative world is marked, among other things, by the following aspects: a laser vision that penetrates into the inner recesses of the human mind; a capacity to capture subtle emotional vibrations; a nuanced presentation of certain aspects of human relationships generally avoided by earlier Tamil writers; a perceptive analysis and portrayal of the problems of change and modernity faced by a traditional society; and an overarching humanity and compassion enveloping his entire work like a delicate aroma.

While JK has dealt with an entire range of characters and situations, he has devoted particular attention to the institution of marriage and its myriad problems. Marriage is recognized in the Indian milieu as the cornerstone of social stability. Logically enough, it has assumed an aura of sanctity. This sanctity itself has had a stifling influence on a natural flowering of the personality of the man and his wife. Such warped personalities lead to deep emotional turmoil beneath a façade of harmony. The situation is accentuated by a newly emerging feminine assertiveness. JK recognizes that the success of the institution of marriage lies in mutual love and understanding and conscious attempt to curb the tendencies of



dominance and emotional aggression. Compromise at the margin without losing one's 'self' should provide key to meaningful harmony.

Informed by such an understanding, JK has woven many stories. These are not idealized constructs. Shorn of romanticism, his characters tread warily the 'terra firma'. You encounter rolling waves of dynamic tension and changing uneasy equilibria.

It is indeed perceptive of Andy Sundaresan to have discerned this core concern running through a number of JK's stories. His stringing these stories together in a volume gives the book a certain unity and personality.

Sundaresan's percipient understanding of the original work and his felicity of diction helped recreate the Tamil original in a different cultural medium. I am confident that the universal problems underlying man-woman relationship in context of marriage bond, as reflected in these stories, will strike a chord in readers with varied cultural backgrounds.

The purpose of this effort will be well served only if the book reaches a wider non-Tamil readership. I hope this objective will be accomplished.

K.S. Subramanian  
December 24, 2004  
Chennai

A literary critic and a long time friend of Jayakanthan's, Dr. K.S. Subramanian, a former senior official of the Asian Development Bank, Manila, has written extensively on Jayakanthan, other Tamil writers and literary topics. He has translated two of Jayakanthan's novels '**Jaya Jaya Shankara**' and '**A Man, A Home, and A World**' from Tamil to English.

# Jayakanthan On Marriage

**J**ayakanthan's creative world is marked, among other things, by the following aspects: a laser vision that penetrates into the inner recesses of the human mind; a capacity to capture subtle emotional vibrations; a nuanced presentation of certain aspects of human relationships generally avoided by earlier Tamil writers; a perceptive analysis and portrayal of the problems of change and modernity faced by a traditional society; and an overarching humanity and compassion enveloping his entire work like a delicate aroma."

From the Foreword by Dr. K.S. Subramanian

I can still vividly recall that day in April of 1994. I was walking through the aisles in the Cerritos Public Library in Los Angeles when I pleasantly came across a stack of Tamil books by Jayakanthan. The library had just begun offering the local Indian population books in vernacular languages Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil –a welcome trend later adopted by other community libraries in California. I instantly grabbed a couple of books and started reading them right away.

I was familiar with Jayakanthan's works in India when they were published in popular Tamil magazines 'Ananda Vikatan,' 'Kalki', and 'Kalaimagal.' At home we probably subscribed or had access to some half-a-dozen Tamil periodicals. My father was a Tamil poet and my sister a writer of Tamil short stories. It is they who fostered in me a love for literature and we often discussed Tamil short stories at dinner time. For a long time Jayakanthan has been my idol.

The Cerritos Public Library helped renew my interest in Jayakanthan.

As I began to read the stories nearly after an interval of twenty years, I felt my two teenage daughters living in US and who knew very little about modern Tamil literature should be introduced to its richness and variety. So I began translating the stories in my spare time. Soon I realized that in trying to help my children appreciate Jayakanthan, I was educating myself by discovering even more nuggets.

Translating Jayakanthan's works has been my principal hobby for the last ten years. I have so far translated five full novels, six novellas, and forty short stories. Fortunately there is such a rich, vast output by Jayakanthan that I can keep myself busy with the mission for many more years.

Some of my translations –short stories–were published by *Chindanai Vattam*, New Jersey, under the title '*Trial by Fire*' to coincide with Jayakanthan's visit to US in June, 2000. A few more can be read on the internet on the website '*Jayakanthan Pakkam*' hosted by Mr. P.K. Sivakumar of New Jersey.

'*Trial by Fire*' was an attempt to introduce Jayakanthan to non-Tamil readers in US as well as to Tamils who needed a good translation of Jayakanthan's works. It included short stories to illustrate the author's depiction of common humanity–*Manithabhimanam*–and thus embraced several universal themes: the compassionate treatment of a rape victim; the redemption of a man in despair facing financial ruin; and the inner struggle of a nun to choose between her parish and domestic bliss, to name only a few.

As my involvement in Jayakanthan's works became wider and deeper, I was especially struck by the author's treatment of marriage in his writings. Jayakanthan examines gender issues in different contexts, albeit in an Indian setting: love marriages, arranged marriages, marriages founded on a lack of understanding and respect; unusual marriages suddenly emerging between young women and relatively older men; couples trying to work out their marital problems through unconventional methods—outside family framework; marriages where one partner is stronger of the two, and so on. Accordingly, I decided to bring out this collection of Jayakanthan's stories organized around a single theme: marriage.

An anthology of Jayakanthan's stories on the theme of marriage under the title '**Till Death Do Us Part**' was published in August, 2005. This is the second volume on the same theme.

Marriage has been described as an egalitarian, shared, lifetime experience. This is not too far from the romanticized view that marriage is bliss—as revealed in conventional morality plays and fairy tales.

Here are stories created by Jayakanthan with all the pain, compassion and wry humor at his command. We are invited to focus on men and women as they go through an education in marriage in compromising and not compromising, but most of all in hearing, feeling, and listening to overcome the emerging complications. Occasionally, the reader gets to see a slice or observe an episode in these stories. What happens next? Will there be a welcome improvement in the couple's marital relationship? Did they find out what would sustain their

marriage? Some of the stories are amusing and some are tragic. But every one of them draws the reader to identify with the characters and curious to know how the couple will resolve their problem.

The characters in these stories are fragile and courageous, reasonable and irrational, but most importantly they are human. We see the changes they grow through –in love, trust and loyalty–and in the process catch snippets from their attempts to make the best of their married lives.

And what a cast of characters we have –full of variety, surprise and fascination! Here is a sample:

- Two sisters–Rajam and Meena (*Made in Heaven/ Marital Loyalty*) –each trapped in an unconsummated marriage, coping and surviving it in their own way;
- Muthuvel (*The Elitists*), a victim of two loveless marriages seems to have finally found his most cherished goal –to begin a new life with a younger woman–only to see it unravel at the last minute;
- A young widower (*The Dominion*) coping with his loneliness and despair and finding a solution – bordering on audacity;
- The earthy, coarse rickshaw driver (*The Low Class*) who could teach the more urbane and the sophisticated a lesson or two about unconditional love in marriage.

And there are more –all sharply and poignantly delineated in these pages.

I want to thank Dr. K.S. Subramanian for contributing the Foreword to the book.



I want to thank my daughter Anu and my brother Seenu for going through the manuscript and offering many valuable comments.

I want to express my gratitude to Anu for patiently listening to my intentions about this book and for carefully reading the result and organizing the material camera-ready for publication.

Special thanks are due to the following for helping me, at their own busy schedule and duties, with their computer skills for the format and get-up of this book: Jon Wonacott, Mathy, Jack Iyer , and Seenu.

I also want to thank my niece Divya for her innovative cover.

I want to thank Akka Mathioli Saraswathy for her support and guidance in making my endeavor to publish this book a reality.

Finally, I want to thank Author Jayakanthan for his permission to translate his works for publication and for his generous time, encouragement and inspiration.

Andy Sundaresan  
El Cerrito, California  
December 15, 2005



# A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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3. *Trial by Fire*, published by *Chindanai Vattam*, 4, McIntire Drive, Belle Mead, NJ 08502. First Edition, June 2000.
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## MADE IN HEAVEN

Rajam ran up the stairs with a fresh, long string of jasmine flowers in hand; she didn't think of decking herself with a few; she felt her sister Meena ought to have the first preference, Rajam could do with what was left. That is what tradition demanded; was not Meena, after all, the new bride, whose marriage is only four days away? The bridegroom was employed in Calcutta. Soon after the wedding the newlyweds would be gone to Calcutta and Rajam would find herself holed up in this house all by herself.

"Meena, how come you are asleep at this hour – four o'clock in the afternoon?" Rajam asked as she entered the hall.

Meena, who was lying on an easy-chair with her eyes closed, now opened them and smiled. "I was not sleeping, simply resting," she said and stood up. Her body betrayed her lazy disposition and as she extended both her arms backwards, clenched them together and twisted her frame, she seemed pleasantly reacting to someone caressing her nape. She shook her entire frame once again to ward off the last traces of laziness and answered Rajam, "Let me go down and wash my face. I will be back soon with oil and comb," and rushed downstairs.

Rajam, who stood watching Meena's receding back, let out a prayer deep from her heart: "I hope she would live with her husband for the rest of her life."

Ten years ago Rajam too was a bride who was married to a decent man, accompanied him to his hometown but was back at her parents' home within two months. Her husband was Rajam's idol; but his heart was with another woman. One day he abandoned Rajam for her. Still Rajam is confi-



dent – as she has been for the last ten years – that one day her husband would surely come back to her.

At the time Meena was a twelve-year old girl. Meena and Rajam were close to one another though separated in age by six years. By nature, Meena was quite outspoken; she would never try to hide her real feelings.

One day Rajam, because of her love for her husband despite their separation, was speaking of him in pleasant, albeit, good terms. Meena, who listened to her sister in silence while biting her nails nervously, slowly lowered her head, let out a whisper packed with heavy disapproval in her voice: “Rajam, you are not a woman; you are just plain stupid; If I were you I would never speak a word about him, neither would I have let him off the hook.”

“What could you have actually done?” Rajam asked.

“I would have simply smashed his head with a stone roller while he was taking a nap. Yes, I mean it! I am telling the truth!” When Rajam looked straight into Meena’s face, she could not help telling herself, “She is certainly capable of doing something like that.”

Maybe it was her hatred for Rajam’s husband that made Meena totally opposed to the idea of marriage. Meena was not someone who could be easily talked into changing her mind. So it was a matter of utter surprise to everyone when Meena, last month, consented to a marriage proposal when broached by her father with some apprehension.

Meena gave her consent even without asking to see her prospective husband. "If you approve, that's fine with me," she told her parents. Their surprise turned to joy that she had consented to marriage at least at her age of twenty two. Matters continued their usual course; the families of the bride and bridegroom visited one another. Meena's photograph was sent to the bridegroom for his approval. There was no need to get the bridegroom's photograph because Meena didn't ask for it. She told her parents: "If you are for this alliance, I will go for it." Since the wedding date was finalized Meena was in a pleasant mood. One felt she was constantly savoring the dreams lurking within her – even with her eyes closed and face always shining. One could sense a renewed vigor in her body and spur in her walk. How did this happen? Why did she give her ready consent to marriage? Why didn't she even ask for the groom's photo? Meena became a puzzle for Rajam. Meena is no ordinary woman, she is a special breed, Rajam thought.

Downstairs, some voices were heard and Rajam neared the stairs and peered down. She saw her father seated on a chair next to a table poring over his shopping list for the upcoming wedding while her mother stood near the kitchen entrance armed with a ladle in one hand. Both the parents were laughing at their daughter Meena rushing headlong toward the stairs with her face pressing against a towel.

Meena –she was carrying in her hands an oil bottle and a comb – while her face, fresh and mildly rinsed with soap water, displayed a broad

smile even as her cheeks seemed flushed red.

“See what is father up to!” Meena said. “He is teasing me!”

“What did he actually say?”

“Forget what he said! Are you going to help me with my hairdo or not?” Meena’s voice suddenly turned stern so Rajam returned to her seat to work on Meena’s ponytail. Meena continued to stand at the center of the hall.

“Why don’t you come here?” Rajam pulled her sister toward a window while holding on to her tresses.

“You are hurting me!” Meena yelled at her. “If this is how you want to help me with my hairdo, I will have nothing to do with you!” She jerked her flowing hair from Rajam’s grip and stared at the street outside.

“What is wrong with you – why are you getting mad at everyone?” Rajam pressed both her hands on Meena’s shoulders and turned her around to face her; she was shocked to notice tears at the corners of Meena’s eyes.

Rajam let out a desperate cry “Meenu!” and Meena buried her head on Rajam’s shoulders and continued to sob incessantly.

“I am really scared about this wedding,” Meena continued. “I have an uneasy feeling when I start thinking I will be gone from here leaving all of you! That means I won’t be able to call on any one of you – my parents and you as my own! I have to give up all of this and start living with someone who demands my full faith and trust.”

“Stop all that rubbish,” Rajam chided her. “You

are an educated young woman, how can you say such a thing? He will simply make you forget all the past relationships!”

“Who?”

“Just a minute, I will let you know,” Rajam answered her and picked up a wedding invitation from a table near the window and read out aloud, “Mr. Suryanarayanan.” While Meena felt her heart gleefully respond to those words she feigned stubbornness and changed the conversation: “Are you going to help me with my hairdo or not?”

“I was going to. Just turn around.”

As she turned around Meena noticed the temple tower afar and asked her sister, “Rajam, can we visit the temple this evening?”

“Sure, we can!”

Meena seemed self absorbed as she set her eyes on the distant sky even as the smile on her face gave way to a sudden glow. Her mind seemed overwhelmed by all kinds of feelings. She seemed on the verge of bursting into every emotion one can imagine – laughter, sadness, anger, ready, friendly conversation or a deliberate silence morphing into a frozen state; she was struggling hard to maneuver through all these myriad emotions.

“Meenu, I want to ask you something!” said Rajam while playing with Meena’s curly locks.

“Go ahead!” The smile on Meena’s face was replaced by a glow.

“I can’t believe your sudden consent for your marriage!”

Meena understood what lay behind Rajam’s

questioning.

“Rajam, you were sixteen when you got married. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“What is marriage, after all? At an age when a girl can’t even imagine the importance of a man for companionship - it all looks like a game. What fills the bride’s mind is all the goodies that the marriage ceremony confers on her – the silk saris, ornaments, sweets, snacks, and the joy of being decked out in the most beautiful costumes in a festive mood – that would be the most profound feeling.”

That’s how Meena always would begin a conversation – after a long studied silence. Her parents would listen to her with their mouths wide open – neither agreeing nor contradicting her words.

“Have you heard the proverb – ‘In a marriage the groom was so busy he forgot to tie the *thali*?’ In a marriage the bride and groom have no time to think of one another and the real meaning of the bond between them. Had I got married at sixteen I too might have treated it as a game only. But I have already experienced a major part of that game in your marriage. At the time I greatly enjoyed the game. You know why? It was game played not just by the children but by the adults as well. You suffered the consequence of that marriage – then you ended up crying and so did the elders. One day you returned home – alone – from Madras and as soon as you got down the taxi you broke down – your husband was responsible for your plight. I started thinking: ‘Here is a man who held my sis-

ter's hand in a ritual, went around the sacrificial fire solemnizing their union and professed his love for her in the presence of all the gods by declaring his commitment to her for this life and beyond. What a farce! How big a hoax it was – stripped of any sacredness or meaning! I must admit my reaction at the time was something beyond my age and experience. Still I believe your own involvement in that game lent me that maturity. It seems to me no woman, on her own, ever thinks of the necessity of marriage in her life; what begins as a fondness of game gradually becomes a necessity. In the beginning I was bored with the game, so I didn't think it was necessary. I simply hated the idea of marriage. I was determined to live my life as single – and that idea grew stronger day by day.”

Rajam listened to Meena and finished her sister's hairdo. She entwined most of the flowers on to Meena's braids and then helped herself with a few. Meena continued talking without ever noticing any of this:

“I hated all men. Your husband is no worse than the rest. Every man looks the same. How can one possibly find a decent fellow in this terrible world? Is any experiment possible in this quest? I am able to see only men who lust after a woman's body. Where is the man who thinks that a woman also has a heart? That's what really scared me! Of course, a woman can certainly live her life as a single—but it seemed to me, again and again, such a life is devoid of any meaning and purpose! To live for myself would only mean self destruction! I began imagining how useful my life would be if I

can share my interests, joys, body and soul with another. Where is that man? I started believing he must have been born somewhere in this world and would be soon coming looking after me! That faith alone . . .”

“Meena, now turn around. Let me place a *kum-kum* on your forehead.” So saying Rajam took out a small pick doused in vermillion and made a small, round dot on Meena’s forehead. She stared into Meena’s eyes and asked her:” Can I ask you something, if you don’t mind?”

“Go ahead!”

“All this talk . . . . . Did you ever . . .?”

“Did I ever what?”

“Did you ever love someone?”

Meena burst into a laugh. “Yes, I did love someone. But I have never set my eyes directly upon that man.”

“Then, have you seen him in a photograph?”

“No! One can not fall in love by looking at a beautiful photograph. As for me, I have carved his form deep in my heart, so I trusted him and surrendered my heart to him. He too would do likewise. Later, I would compare him with the one in my heart. That would be an ideal match. Only then would I love him. It is only after that we both would become ideal lovers. If I fail in this effort, I would be a failure in my life. This is all what a woman can hope to accomplish in our country, in the society we live in. As for the so-called love people talk about, I think it is just nonsense! It doesn’t work for you or me!

I am now twenty-two, how long can I continue

living like this? I was against the idea of marriage not because I was interested in a celibate life but because I wanted a happy one! So I gave my consent for marriage in good faith. Is good faith a monopoly of women only? I am sure there are men of good faith too! If he doesn't appear on the scene till I turned twenty two, where is the proof he is actually somewhere around? So my mind was in turmoil; and one day, after several attempts, when Father mentioned about this boy, I gave my consent. I think life is a trial, so let us wait and see what happens."

Rajam drew Meena into her warm embrace and assured her, "Have no doubt. Your husband will be an ideal one."

"What do you mean?"

"He will be just as you have described him – someone who shares your interests, joys, body and soul."

Meena was very happy to hear those words spoken by another voice.

The time was now five.

"The time is already five," Rajam urged her sister. "Why don't you don a new sari? Let us go the temple."

Meena selected a new sari from the bureau even as she spoke. "I am afraid I have spoken too much. I have actually lectured to you. I am sorry, what more can I say? I feel like pouring out everything out of my heart. I find some comfort when I do that; you too didn't utter a single word. Why? Are you mad or something?"

"No, I am not. What you speak for one day is



worth pondering over for many more days! What more can I say? I don't know where you learnt all this stuff! You have become a real bookworm! I must ask your husband to forbid you from reading any more books – when you move into his household,” Rajam concluded with a laugh.

“Sir, a telegram!” A voice was heard and Rajam approached the staircase. Meena finished wearing her blouse and adjusting her upper garment and stood behind her sister. Their father, seated on a chair near a table while busily poring over the shopping list, opened the telegram and read the contents. Their mother rushed from the kitchen and stared at her husband while trying to conceal her rising panic. A few moments after its contents were read, the telegram slipped from the father's hands and landed on the floor, so did the shopping list after floating in the air for a few seconds.

‘Mr. Suryanarayanan expired suddenly – after suffering a heart attack,’ was the message in the telegram that threw the entire household into a state of shock and gloom. Rajam who could not dare face Meena closeted herself into a corner of the bedroom – sobbing uncontrollably. Father seemed frozen in his chair, the hand resting on his head. Mother never ventured out of the kitchen.

Upstairs, Meena stood with her back against a pillar and both her hands encircling it. Her face stared at the sky above with eyes closed. Gone was the glow and smile from the face. She was not crying; still, tears poured down from the corners of both eyes and swamped her body. Her eyes conjured that scene – the young man she had lodged in

her memory for almost a month committing her body and soul, while recalling her promise to him, 'I am ever ready to offer you my heart, passion, body and spirit.' She seemed lost in a dream of a vicarious pleasure. Suddenly she opened her eyes.

"What can I do - frozen in this state of mind? I must do something! But, what can I do? What should I do?"

She seemed utterly confused. She paced up and down the veranda a couple of times; she held the window bars in a grip and scanned the temple tower visible afar in the skyline. Her eyes fell on the wedding invitation near the window – the one that announced her marriage four days away and welcomed friends and relatives; she opened and read the contents.

"My youngest daughter Meenakshi is to be married to Sri Suryanarayanan, B.Sc, in holy matrimony . . . . ."

"What a cursed, doomed creature! She finally decided to get married after so many years, and now he is gone! What a miserable, wretched girl!" Mother's lament - in a tired refrain was heard from the kitchen - followed by Father's retort.

"Why do you call her cursed? She is really lucky, I would say. What if the groom died after the wedding?"

'What a horrible thing to say! Why are people so selfish?' Meena couldn't help thinking.

'My parents may find comfort with these exchanges; Rajam too may give in to grief – over my loss as well as hers. But how about me? I must do something! What should I do?' Meena shook both

her hands in despair. She once again approached the pillar, leaned over it and closed her eyes. When she woke up after a long time, darkness had enveloped the surroundings.

Meena calmly walked down the stairs – the sound of her rustling silk sari and the smell from the jasmine flowers following her. Father, aware she was approaching him, remained silent and couldn't bring himself to look at her. Meena stood facing him. He wished she would move past him, so he cast his face down and watched her shadow.

The shadow stood motionless.

“Father!” Her voice betrayed no sorrow or pent-up emotion as he had expected. She spoke in a sweet voice.

As he shifted his gaze from her shadow to her face, he saw her in full glow.

“We have to leave right away. . . Father, let us go!”

“Go where?” He hesitated to ask.

“To Madras. Didn't we get the telegram? We need to leave right away.”

Mother heard the conversation and intervened. “What are you talking about? What has he got to do with you? He is gone before any relationship could be established.”

“What if no relationship was ever established? Can't one express normal feelings over one's sudden demise? What has death to do with relationship, anyway? They have sent us a wire and should we not respond?”

“Father would go and formally offer his condolences to the family; why do you want to get

involved?" Meena stared at her mother in response to her words – her words cutting through the mother's eyes and penetrating deep further. Still gnashing her teeth she locked her eyes on her father and spoke in a soft, diamond-sharp voice, without battling an eye.

"I must go! Are you going to accompany me, or should I go on my own?"

"Father, please do as she demands. I know how she feels." Rajam spoke as she came down the stairs. Mother averted her face and returned to the kitchen. Father checked his watch to see how much time he had to get ready for the next train to Madras.

A horse-drawn cart came and stood at the entrance to the house of Parameshwara Iyer. Tired from a night-long journey and devastated over the collapse of the marriage plans, Meena's father alighted from the cart, his face pallid and shrunk. Meena emerged with her dark sari glowing in the early sun's rays – her face still aglow like the bride she was yesterday and the jasmine flowers still fresh and emitting their pleasant aroma. Father was about to pay off the driver when Meena intervened.

"Let the cart wait," she told him.

Father was a little confused what she was saying or why. Still, why would he deny her request? He directed the driver to wait and entered the house with Meena.

The men and women gathered at the entrance dispersed and let the visitors into the house. Parameshwara Iyer, who was seated on the veranda, recognized them and ran toward them openly crying, "Dear Surya," and embraced Meena's father. Like a statue Meena moved in elegant steps. As soon as she entered the house, the women of the household – her close, blood relatives as well as others associated with

the departed soul—accosted her. A few broke down in incessant sobbing, while others tried to drag her into their embrace to join them in ritual mourning.

“Please leave me alone,” Meena spoke in a calm but heavy voice. “I am not here to join others in a ritual mourning.”

“She could be above thirty, ” a woman was telling someone. “It is her horoscope that did her husband in,” she prophesized.

“Thirty? No way! She doesn’t look that old,” replied another woman implying Meena didn’t look her actual age.

Meena’s ears were privy to all this chatter. Tears continued to flow copiously from her eyes as she tried to compare the person before her with the one she had carved in her heart.

He lay there like a baby – his face totally free from the scars owing to any youthful indiscretions and with an innocent smile under the soft, red lips resembling a flower offering truth as honey; above his long aquiline nose one could see dark, curly locks flowing toward the eyebrows; the eyes were closed and peaceful as they seemed to declare to Meena, ‘I have been waiting all along to offer myself to you and now my deed is done.’ He reminded one of a golden statue mercilessly cast away into a dustbin.

Meena wiped the tears off her face. Her eyes shimmered brightly. The smile on her face was soon replaced by a glow. She made up her mind what she should do next.

She neared the body and stood at the feet extended toward her and stared at the face, then silently bowed down and touched both the feet in utter reverence. A few jasmine flowers from her hair fell on the floor. Her eyes

reverential bow. She abruptly pulled out the jasmine-string from her hair and dropped the contents at the feet of the body lying before her. Then she sat cross-legged on the floor and while her eyes were scanning the ceiling her palm suddenly erased the '*kumkum*' on her forehead.

That move shocked everybody. Confused and a little bewildered they couldn't even bring themselves to shed any tears at a time like this. Then Meena suddenly got up and walked away—heading toward the exit. Father ran toward her and held her hand and slowly led her out of the house.

"Meena, why did you do such a thing?" he asked while trying to contain his emotions.

Meena remained silent. As the cart began to move once they were inside, she spoke, her eyes in a daze and the face aglow: "Father, I know what I am doing; I do think there is a purpose in my becoming his widow."

"But he was never legally married to you! Why do you have to suffer this deprivation?" Father seemed frustrated.

"Hmm," Meena let out a mild laugh. Then she stared at her palm covered with vermillion, and continued: "Had I been legally married to him I would have burned myself on the funeral pyre with him."

"Meena!" Horrified, Father grasped her arm.

The cart driver looked at the sky and spoke his mind: "It is these virtuous women who bring rain and shine to this world. We know women, who even after several years of widowhood, have no qualms in decking themselves with cosmetics . . ." He was about to say more when Meena suddenly intervened: "That would only mean that such a woman, even if she had physically spent many years with her husband, has not really lived with such a man. Has she not suffered enough—that she didn't live with a man meant for her? To sacrifice her life for her husband—will it not be another crime? It all

depends on the individual woman and her conscience. As far as I am concerned this is the right decision for me. To demand it should be made a moral obligation for the entire society would be a crime.” She went on talking through the entire journey and the driver was paying her attention as if he was privy to some sacred utterances.

Father, who was listening to her, felt Meena had suddenly aged twenty years . . .

The cart was on the move; it was a life that had come to a standstill.

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Note:

Original title: *Udankattai* (1960)

## MARITAL LOYALTY

**T**he news spread fast and wide. Soon it was common knowledge among the town folks how the bride Meena openly committed herself to voluntary widowhood - when her prospective groom whom she had not even met or seen before had died prematurely before the wedding - by casting off the flowers in a reverential bow at the dead man's feet and erasing the *kumkum* on her forehead.

A few progressives mocked her 'crazy behavior' while some conservatives beholden to orthodoxy sympathized with her plight but questioned the logic how a woman could become a widow without being formally married to a man. Everyone — that is, every adult who could think and become emotional over the matter— had a strong opinion about Meena's decision while totally ignoring what lay behind her action: a unique state of mind tempered with her own experience and feelings.

Meena stood on her own – totally oblivious to those howls and comments.



Rajam, Meena's elder sister, whom fate had condemned to return home permanently after being abandoned by her husband and who still lives with a lingering hope that one day her estranged husband would be coming back to her, was totally devastated over Meena's loss. The sisters stopped indulging in intimate talk as they used to. Rajam was overcome by a vague fear whenever she happened to watch Meena's face; she spoke to Meena only when spoken to. Her voice would suddenly turn gentle and tender—marked by a touch of reverence toward her younger sister.

As far as their parents were concerned, fate seemed to have condemned them to confront an inscrutable question: Why this horror—two grown-up daughters, each a victim of a curse? The only rational, human explanation seemed to be fate! Some consolation!

Each member of the family harbored a secret fear and dare not open up the heart to others lest it wrought some unknown peril. So everybody carried on – silently – over these last three months as if nothing has ever happened and even if it had, everyone had forgotten about it.

When this summer ends, Meena, who had stopped her college education, plans to go back to school. Who can change her mind?

“Whatever you want to do, it is fine with me. I only wish you happiness,” Krishna Iyer felt his voice choke as he uttered those words to his daughter Meena. Rajam, who stood on the porch in

a corner drying her sari sealed her lips and shed tears in silence.

“Father, I am quite happy. What do I need more? Rajam, I find no reason why you should feel sorry for me! I am happy and contented.” Smiling, Meena warmly drew Rajam’s face and embraced her.

Rajam continues to wear the *thali* tied by her husband at her wedding because he is still alive and also because she loves him and hopes to regain her married life sometime in the future. Accordingly, like any typical married woman of her class, she continues to apply *turmeric* to her face and *kumkum* on her forehead. Still the sad episode from Meena’s life did affect her. Rajam totally gave up the customary habit of decking out Meena’s mop of curly locks with flowers while picking out some to adore her own. When the occasion demanded - either in a temple ceremony or at home in their room of worship - she would simply snatch a flower and gently stick it into her braid.

It was a Friday evening when Rajam was applying the *kumkum* - in a religious gesture - to the *Tulasi* stand in the compound she heard the sound of a horse-drawn-cart pulling up in front of the house and turned around.

She stopped right there in shock until the passenger emerged out of the cart, dismissed the driver and slowly approached Rajam. He was dressed in a suede coat, holding a leather suitcase

in one hand and a set of books in the other; he was tall and handsome and a gray patch two inches wide ran through his hair. As soon as he neared her Rajam darted into the house; words failed her as she rushed into the kitchen and called out: "Mother, mother . . ." Her lips quivered and the eyes swelled with tears even as a gentle smile played on her lips.

Her mother Lakshmi Ammal seemed a little confused in the beginning but soon sensed what was going on. She instantly drew the upper portion of her sari to wrap it tight around her shoulders and emerged in the main hall where she saw her son-in-law waiting. She was overcome by emotion and nearly burst into tears. She composed herself and warmly invited the visitor into the house.

"Please come in, " she said. "I am glad you made it at least after ten years!" She wiped the tears off her face.

"Your brother-in-law is here," Rajam ran up the stairs like a child in excitement and conveyed the news to Meena with a smile.

"My brother-in-law!" Meena's eyebrows narrowed in surprise.

"That rascal! What brings him here?" Father Krishna Iyer exploded as he emerged from his room upstairs.

Horried at his reaction, Rajam ran toward her father and grabbed both his hands in despair. Realizing he did overreact, the father bowed his head

down.

“Father, please! Don’t pickup any quarrel with him,” Rajam pleaded - with her voice trailing off amidst sobs.

“My dear girl, don’t be silly! Why would I pick up any quarrel with him? How can we blame others for what fate has in store for us? I just wonder what brings him here! I heard rumors that he is living in Madras with that other woman; I was told that he even shows up rarely at his own house in Mylapore. Is he now planning to take you to Madras? . . .” He set about thinking.

“Father, please don’t bring up any of this – his escorting me to Madras – in your personal conversation with him. Let us first find out what is actually on his mind; if he is so inclined and if I am lucky, that would be the outcome. Consider him as someone – an outsider, a total stranger. Would you not invite such a person to our home and make some gentle inquiries? That’s what I ask of you.” Rajam wiped the tears off her face.

Instantly changing his attitude and demeanor Krishna Iyer climbed down the stairs and welcomed the visitor: “Please come in!”

The visitor arose from the wooden swing on which he was seated and joined both palms in a respectful gesture. “That’s fine, please be seated,” Krishna Iyer told him with a raised hand, drew a chair within his reach and sat on it. Both men remained silent – a little confused how to begin their conversation. Meanwhile Krishna Iyer took stock

of the man before him.

“Quite a smart fellow; highly educated and really brilliant. He finished his Masters before he was twenty-two! He became a professor even before he was twenty-five years old and that was the reason why I chose him as my son-in-law! Who doubts his brilliance, anyway? His pointed nose tells you right away: I am a professor.”

Was it not true there was a time when Krishna Iyer held his son-in-law in high regard and esteem? Can you blame everything on fate?

Shankar closed the book in his hand and looked at Krishna Iyer. He spoke as he removed his eyeglasses: “I happened to be visiting the nearby *Annamalai University* on some business. So I came to see you. Where is Meena?” As he turned around he noticed Meena, dressed in white and bereft of flowers and other adornments, coming down the stairs.

Shankar reacted with a shudder and his eyes turned moist: ten years ago he had seen Meena, at his marriage, as a girl sporting a blouse and skirt down to her ankle and darting from one place to another like a sparrow let loose; now she seemed totally frozen to numbness by her loss; she had let her body and soul be consumed by fiery ideals forging her into an ascetic bent on self destruction.

Meena offered Shankar respects by joining both her palms in a symbolic gesture. He too reciprocated with a gesture.

Rajam served Shankar coffee. While letting the hot coffee cool Shankar said: "Meena, I heard everything about you. I just can't believe it!"

Meena let out a gentle laugh and replied: "I too couldn't believe what Rajam told me about you. I used to wonder if any husband could be like you. Then I understood all men are alike."

"Serves him right," Krishna Iyer thought to himself, 'Only Meena could dare make such comments. Who knows, maybe, she will bring him to his senses with even more comments.' He took leave of them saying, "Please keep talking, I should be back soon," and hastily withdrew to his room upstairs.

"Meena, why do you keep standing? Please sit down."

"I am fine," Meena replied and continued to stand and stare at Shankar even as she crossed both the arms across her bosom.

"Please do sit down, I feel like talking a lot of things with you."

Meena politely sat on a chair. Shankar began: "Having seen you as a young girl very active and joyful, I am now totally shaken by your plight."

Meena couldn't help grumbling to herself: 'You have heart too?'

"Meena! Let us put aside what you have heard about me. We will discuss that later," Shankar said, and continued: "What drove you to this decision? Do you think this deprivation and sacrifice

are really necessary?"

Meena keenly examined her palm and spoke while bowing her head down.

"What more can I say? Because of men like you women are reduced to this state. One should become a widow even without a formal marriage." While he failed to comprehend what Meena actually meant, Shankar nevertheless understood she was mocking him.

"Meena, I know you are terribly mad at me. Let us put it aside for a moment. As a matter of fact, I am somewhat surprised that I came to see you. You too may feel the same way. I came here deliberately for only one purpose: to meet with you and talk with you. Meena, I don't think you should destroy your life like this."

Meena raised her head and stared at him, her eyes poking fun with an admixture of contempt and ridicule: "Thanks. You say you are sorry for me; have you ever thought of the other woman – the one whom you took as a wife with a pledge before a sacrificial fire and witnessed by millions of gods from heaven?" She began her interrogation calmly in a low voice, yet as she proceeded further she paused now and then to repeat her refrain: "Have you really thought about her?" And when she finally concluded her grilling she could not help brandishing her hand toward him as if challenging a witness in the dock of a court room.

Meena's justified anger and feelings were something Shankar could easily accept.

“When I could bring myself to be involved so deeply in your situation how could I fail to ignore hers? As a matter of fact I keep thinking of all those women who share your fate. It makes no sense to destroy one’s life based on some illusions. I have made this very clear to Rajam also. Let us discuss my situation later. Why do you have to live like *Thilakavathi*? Why are you so stubborn and opposed to marriage?”

“Marriage!” Meena muttered to herself. The very word seemed to depress her.

“Because you had chosen to betray Rajam I have concluded marriage, as a ritual, has no meaning. These rituals, our scriptures, castes and customs have not assured that men would adhere to their moral obligations. The institution of marriage has failed to guarantee a woman’s spiritual life; why should she commit the most pure and innocent of her own body and soul to someone not wholly committed to her? Once a woman commits to such a man and sacrifices herself at the altar of marriage she feels degraded and spends the rest of her life frantically clinging to that falsehood. Don’t you think the alternative – to banish the very institution of marriage – would be more honorable?” Her words, harsh and cruel, mercilessly bombarded him, but Shankar took them in stride and listened to her with deep attention.

Upstairs, poised carefully near a window slightly ajar, Krishna Iyer listened to the ongoing conversation between Meena and Shankar; so did Rajam and her mother in the kitchen. Because they



all wanted that he should change her mind and that she should change his, they felt both Shankar and Meena were reasonable in their arguments.

“Granted I am a scoundrel, you can’t assume all males . . .” Shankar was about to continue when Meena suddenly interrupted him – containing her sudden excitement.

“No! No man is ever loyal to a woman; the woman always ends up in deceit. Feeling helpless and seeing no other way out, women continue to go on the beaten track, but I can’t. But after a long deliberation and thinking I felt human life should have some purpose – just as you have mentioned – and I wanted to believe that somewhere in this world there is a man who shared my values; that was just a faith – a blind faith you may say – that made me consent to my marriage. As far as Indian women are concerned marriage is simply a trial. So, I told myself, why not try and see what happens? If I am lucky, I would find someone close to my heart’s desire, or else I would feel ‘tainted’. Life is after all meant for living and I was determined to carry on with a blot, if necessary. But then as fate would have it, he is gone – even without a chance to taint me. That’s really a divine providence!

I made a decision against my grain, but fate has revealed the truth to me. My decision is final. When I gave my consent to marry a man, it means I am already married to him; if he dies, I am obliged to become his widow, so I did become his widow. So my life does have a meaning and pur-

pose. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. It certainly makes no sense." Meena seemed to have felt she had spoken her piece and now calmly cast an empty look at the street outside.

Shankar listened to her with one arm resting on his chest and the other holding his chin while slowly stiffening the folds on his forehead. To grasp the basic premise of Meena's argument, he thought, was like trying to reach a conclusion starting from another, totally contradictory position. But he also discerned certain hollowness in that premise and his rational mind told him he could slowly unravel it and thereby completely shatter her argument. He coughed gently and asked.

"Even in our country widows are getting remarried . . . What do you think of such a practice?" He spoke while cleaning his eyeglasses.

"I don't claim my decision would be the right one for every woman," Meena began, and continued: "If a woman, having lived several years with a man decides to live her life with another man – if she believes she deserves another life – she can't be blamed for such a wish. Even if the dead husband was someone she pursued and married as her own choice, one should consider her decision for another marriage as only as a 'situational crime.' Why? Because she actually did not live with the man meant for her; so, after his death, how can you expect her to live by savoring his memories? Has she not suffered enough, already, by not living with a man meant for her? Why subject her to even

more suffering and sacrifice? So we have no right to interfere in her decision. What is wrong if she wants to get married again?"

"You were claiming the man you were supposed to marry was meant for you; then, how come he was gone without sharing any of his time with you and hardly any relationship?" Shankar asked. "When we talk about a widow contemplating another marriage you argue such a woman never lived with a man meant for her! Then, by what logic can you say, in your case – even with no actual marriage taking place – he was meant for you?"

"You keep harping on the word marriage; don't you realize it has lost its meaning because of people like you? Once the notion of marital loyalty has been created – why do we need to bring up marriage to validate it? Doesn't the very decision to take a husband impose upon a woman such an obligation? Why render marital loyalty meaningless with another decision?"

"Are you suggesting a widow contemplating a second marriage is lacking in marital loyalty?"

"That was the prevailing opinion some hundred years ago. I was talking only about myself, why are you dragging other women into this?"

"I don't understand how you can walk away from what applies, in general, to all women!"

"I have a heart. And it gladly accepts my decision. Can you say there are no young widows who,

with no coercion, are able to lead full productive lives – savoring the memories of their husbands?”

“They do exist.”

“Are you justified in lecturing to those women, ‘Why are you wasting your lives? You ought to get married again’? Won’t you think that would be even crueler than forced widowhood?”

Shankar became silent for a few seconds before he spoke his words, followed by a deep sigh: “Meena, I have now fully understood the situation. I am entirely responsible for your present condition. At a very young age you watched your sister’s life collapse, so you have come to hate me and men in general. You decided that no man could ever be loyal to his wife. You rejected marriage because allegiance and devotion are totally alien to men. Then you felt your life needed a purpose and meaning – so you consented to marriage. Even then you were not totally convinced – you had only some blind faith. You called marriage a trial and went after it. You expected only defeat in your endeavor. And when that marriage ended with neither a victory nor defeat – you started trying to console yourself. I would even say you are pleased with this outcome. Let me make myself clear: all this would only suggest you are trying to deceive yourself. The truth is you have no faith in your ideals; you are scared they will never be realized. This is just an attempt on your part to let all your ideals be devoured in the funeral pyre of the dead groom while reducing yourself to a passive and sluggish existence.” He concluded with these

words, followed by a sudden silence: “Meena, you are surely going to suffer the consequences of your decision.”

He continued - his voice choking: “You are not the only individual with a heart. I too have one. Feelings are common to all human beings. I never believed you are capable of articulating your feelings so well. I used to think you are like your sister – just a woman with a good heart. You must be well read – I don’t mean this as sarcasm. As you have gained more experience you have also independently developed a subjective outlook in life. So you became a victim of certain ideals; but as you gain more experience you will grow wiser and as time goes you will eventually change your mind. What you once believed as right might seem quite wrong – time alone can bring about these changes. I have come to believe that I am responsible – either directly or indirectly – for you ending up in this condition. So let me clarify my situation. You are a smart woman; you can make up your own mind.” He examined his watch.

“I have got to go; still I am happy in talking with you. I often come across people who are unwilling to think rationally. So I admire those who think – either correctly or incorrectly to argue their point of view. The positive outcome is, sooner or later, their thinking would lead them to truth. You are the second person I have come across in that category; there is another woman – it would be a bit ingenuous to bring her name here – still I would like to talk about her – she is the one your

sister Rajam dislikes. She is a thinker – a deep thinker. But she would be a total contrast to you! Maybe the world would agree with her if she was born a century later. You deserve to have been born a century earlier! You are born now and tormenting yourself!

She was my friend even before Rajam and I got married. We went to school together. She thought marriage is just a ritual and meaningless; she used to argue man must be free to love and that marriage binds him to a relationship that crushes love. Those days I used to argue a lot with her – sometimes I used to feel she was right, but I had no courage to openly endorse her opinions. She told me: ‘Marriage is based on the principle of ownership; if ownership is important, marriage too is important. I don’t claim anything of yours, except what you feel in your heart for me. If you want to get married and claim other rights for your heirs, I would easily give my consent.’ She asked for only one thing – the right to love me! I was utterly confused! Her friendship would amount to a life with no company and certainly no fulfillment. To me she was just an intellectual companion. I seemed lost in total confusion and when my parents nagged me to get married; I was afraid to say no and so I gave my consent. That was my situational crime!”

Rajam, standing near the kitchen door, sobbed. Shankar turned around and watched her, and continued.

“Even after my marriage, this lady-friend didn’t

come looking for me; it was I who visited her. I opened up to Rajam and told her about this lady-friend. Rajam must have been devastated – she must have thought I belonged only to her. She made a big scene – screaming, crying and fighting – and suddenly left me to return to her parents. Wherever Rajam lives, she is the one who has the right to call herself my wife. I am sorry that her life got stuck. If she is willing, I am prepared to annul this right so that she can . . . .”

“Say no more,” Rajam hollered and Shankar turned around in shock. Meena raised her head. Rajam tried to wipe off the tears with the loose end of her sari as she entered the main hall - still sobbing like a little girl.

“I was mad and left you in anger; did I ever imagine you would just stay away from me for ever? I am sorry I thought my husband belonged to me only. Please forgive me. You are, after all, a man and you may do as you please. I realize it was my fault that I got mad and never tried to change your attitude.”

“Rajam, I am not saying men and women ought to have different standards. We are born in this world only once, why should we suffer because of marriage or anything else? Man must lead, to his best abilities, an honest and peaceful life. If it is necessary that he must free himself from the hardship and struggle to seek his own truth, he should be able to do so. If necessary, even the ancient scriptures need to be altered. Don’t you see?” Shankar was about to continue.

“No, you don’t need to change anything. I was hoping one of these days you will come back to me. Even if I am not the reason why you are here, I will be more than willing to live under your care.” Rajam was still crying and Shankar stared at her a little baffled.

“Meena, your brother-in-law was saying that he was responsible for your condition. I must admit I am also equally responsible for your situation. Had I stayed with my husband –whether he was right or wrong–I wouldn’t have sown the poison in your young heart. Please forgive me! Please change your mind!” She pleaded with Meena. Overcome by emotion she asked her husband: “Can I go with you?”

“Of course, you can. Human beings have no right to destroy their own lives. I am willing to do anything to make your life happy. You must also understand what makes me happy; otherwise, it is better we get separated from one another . . . ”

“No, we have been separated enough,” Rajam told him and walked toward the stairs. Krishna Iyer soon came to the main hall climbing down the stairs.

“Father, I am leaving . . . ”

“I am very happy for you,” Father answered her. “But why this hurry? You can leave tomorrow . . . .Please talk to your husband.”

“Yes, I will be leaving only tomorrow . . . There is no other train today.” Rajam ran up the stairs. Meena too followed her.

“Meena, I have a confession to make: what I did was wrong! Had I lived with my husband all these years he would have changed and belonged to me. It was I who left him; after all I was the one who had the right to claim him as my partner. He is not a bad person, after all. He could have easily deceived me –if he wanted–but he told me the truth and I got mad!” Rajam was so happy



she couldn't contain her excitement.

"Meena, you too must think over and change your mind," Rajam begged her sister while sobbing to herself.

Meena calmly held Rajam's both hands and spoke: "Rajam, you are now very happy because you are going to live with your husband. Let me assure you I am also happy to the same extent. It makes no sense to change my decision; every flower is not a lotus that blooms on sunrise, withers in moonlight and again blooms at the next sunrise. I am the flower that blooms only once." She concluded with a pleasant smile: "Be nice to your husband, and please don't forget me! And keep writing to me now and then." Rajam wept.

Shankar looked at his watch and grumbled to himself: 'The time is already nine, we can leave only tomorrow.' He opened his leather suit case and pulled out a letter pad and began writing:

Dear Suguna:

I should have come there by the time this letter reaches you. I missed the train, and I will be arriving there only tomorrow. I tried my best to change my sister-in-law's decision, but it was of no use. She and you are like two opposite poles. My sister-in-law is a product of the Tamil culture, steeped in traditional values; it undergoes no changes when confronted by new currents. The only positive outcome following my visit here is that my wife will be accompanying me back home. I am also writing to my parents be-

cause they would be happy to hear this news.

Rest in person.

Yours, Shankar

As Shankar folded the letter in an envelope and got ready to pen the next one, he heard Rajam addressing him: “Why don’t you go in and change?” He noticed his wife standing before him with a smile on her face exposed between the two chains of the wooden swing. He made the usual smile and told her: “Let me first finish this letter.”

“To whom are you writing the letter?”

“This is for your father-in-law,” he replied.

Rajam was about to ask, “What about the one you wrote earlier?” Shankar too thought she would. But she didn’t.

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Note:

Original title: *Karpu Nilai* (1961)



## THE ELITISTS

**M**uthuvel was pacing up and down in his private study-cum-library – his head bowed down, both hands clasped together behind his back.

He cast his look far away—the eyes traveling from his bed to the four corners of the hall. Though the huge hall was immersed in darkness, his bed was basking in the glow of light from a lamp on a nearby table. In the dim light spreading beyond the bed and into the surroundings one could see rows and rows of bookshelves as well as steel racks reaching to human height. After walking in his shoes on the coir-mat laid between the aisles, Muthuvel paused to examine his bed and the scene beyond the table lamp.

On the bed lay several books - testifying to the fact that Muthuvel had been permanently robbed of his sleep. An easy-chair next to the bed meant for reading was also strewn with books. The table next to the bed – so placed to facilitate reading as well writing while resting on

the bed – was also littered with books. The other items on the table adding to the pell-mell included a silver jug, a bottle of sleeping pills, a pen, a pair of eyeglasses and an ink bottle.

The old ceiling fan above the bed was whirring at a slow speed, but Muthuvel felt its blast was fast and comfortable enough.

Still, all these comforts meant little to Muthuvel who had hardly enjoyed sound sleep for a long time. How could he - when he has found no peace of mind? His mind was always occupied with something or the other. He had read somewhere that sleeplessness could be a sign of mental illness. He had decided a long time ago that at some point in his life he would be branded as a 'mental case.' So he sought the advice of a doctor who recommended a regimen Muthuvel had already known: daily walks, regular physical exercise, freeing the mind of any thoughts before going to bed. Muthuvel returned home with a fond hope that he would faithfully follow the doctor's advice and everything would be just fine.

But, eventually he was forced to rely on tranquilizers. He knew the drugs would have a long-term effect on his health, but he dismissed any concern saying, "Why worry? After all the very act of living one's life does impose some long-term effects on the body, does it not?" So he didn't make a big deal about taking half a pill when sleep eluded him.

But today he is determined not to take any

sleeping pills. He won't need them, anyway. Starting from tomorrow he will be sharing his life with another woman— is it not true he needs no pills while enjoying her company?

“Okay, let me get on with my writing,” he reminded himself. He tried to collect the scattered thoughts crowding his mind and pour out all his feelings in black and white. He eagerly sought the letter pad he had put away on the table a short while ago.

“Everybody, more or less, already knows everything about me. What more can I reveal to these folks?” he asked himself as he approached the bed.

As he neared the table he once again stared at the bookshelves in another corner of the room. Suddenly he felt his eyes blinded with darkness sweeping all over the surroundings.

Muthuvel was no stranger to this hall and the attendant loneliness. Yet because, as of tonight, this solitary experience would be coming to an end — he won't be spending another single night in this house — he wanted to live fully his last night amidst these familiar surroundings.

His hands eagerly groped a nearby wall and switched all the lights — one after another — in the hall. The entire hall came to life with dazzling brightness and his eyes caught the sight of his close, intimate friend Sardar — his pet dog — who suddenly arose from where he was resting lest someone intrude into his master's privacy. Alert, his ears raised as if poised for attack, Sardar came

over to his master and stood next to him.

The library – a repository of all the knowledge Muthuvel had collected from all corners of the world over the last twenty years– was his greatest achievement. His predecessors and ancestors had sought wealth as a worthy goal and successfully enriched their ancestral property. However, it was Muthuvel who courageously departed from conventional wisdom and devoted his entire life to pursuit of knowledge.

As a tribute to his ancestors – who were mostly illiterate – Muthuvel has been playing a prominent role in the local community – by founding a college, a high school and elementary schools.

When he thought of his educational efforts he suddenly recalled his childhood Brahmin friend Vaitha - who had a profound influence on Muthuvel - and who had met with premature death.

Muthuvel stood in silence savoring the memories of his old days with his friend and mentor Vaitha - while his hands unconsciously were caressing the neck of Sardar by his side.

On the library walls one could see portraits of Tagore, Leo Tolstoy, Walt Whitman, Mahakavi Bharathi, Shelly, Shakespeare and several other literary giants. Muthuvel was sad that Vaitha's photo was not displayed on the wall. He had tried very hard – unsuccessfully - to get Vaitha's photograph after his untimely death. But for their chance meeting, would these portraits on the library walls ever carry any special significance?

He believed Vaitha's soul lived in each and every volume in those bookshelves. He would even go further and aver that Vaitha lived within his own - Muthuvel's - soul. Had he not met Vaitha, Muthuvel was sure, he would have never grown up to be an intellectual totally detached from this society and his family members and thereby elevated himself to the status he currently enjoyed. Alternatively, Muthuvel would have been reduced to doing what every one of his ancestors had done –generation after generation: lay claim to what his ancestors had bequeathed to him and spend all his lifetime wallowing in it! What an awful, suicidal enterprise that would have been!

He thought: 'At this stage – as I examine my personal life – how I have faced all the changes, disappointments, and accusations over the years – I am acutely aware of what I owe to Vaitha. He is the one wholly responsible for whatever insight I have gained over the years into my life and people around me.

I have spent the most enjoyable years of my life in this knowledge center and I have since renamed it as *Professor Vaidyanatha Iyer Library*, and donated it as a gift to the local college. The last sentence in the certificate transferring the title to the college carries, for me, the most meaningful words.' Muthuvel's eyes turned misty as he recalled those words.

'I have lived my life with a great faith and purpose; tomorrow I am about to begin a second life. This society, had it a conscience, or felt a sense of



appreciation and gratitude for my efforts, could have granted me this second life as a reward. It didn't. Society feels only hunger and pain; it can only talk, gossip and denounce. So even as the society chooses to condemn me for my action, I have decided to claim this second life as my legal right.'

Within the next few hours his fifty-year existence would undergo a change – like a novel with its first chapter ending and a second one beginning. How long will it last? How many years? Even if it lasted a short duration – he was certain of one thing - his second life would be a meaningful and an enduring one. With that hope glowing within him Muthuvel set about examining the elements of his past years – the one he is about to give up and the consequences there of – objectively in his mind.

The silence around him was suddenly interrupted by someone's cough from downstairs. 'She has been a chronic asthmatic patient for the last twenty years,' Muthuvel recalled of his wife Bhagyam. 'She would take no medication; she would never miss even for a single day her customary cold-water bath and would observe strict fasting once every week. She would spend all her time complaining to everyone about her poor health; she believes her very complaint that nobody cared about her would remedy her condition. So everyone in the household understood what would give Bhagyam peace of mind and put up with her – except, of course, Dakshayani, Muthuvel's second wife, who misses no opportunity to stand up

against Bhagyam, ready for a fight.’

Whenever Muthuvel’s first wife Bhagyam starts coughing, one could be sure the time was an hour past midnight. The cough would grow steadily in intensity while it lasted. In between the successive coughs, she would rail against her husband with verbal assaults that would bombard Muthuvel’s ears even as he was confined to his room upstairs with the doors shuttered. That would be the time when Muthuvel would eagerly take a sleeping pill. He would put away the book he was reading –even if it offered the most fascinating experience of his life - turn off the light, and retire to bed.

The lights upstairs dimming following her outbursts would signal to Bhagyam that her pleas have been ignored; she would be driven with even more intensity and bitterness to continue her harangue.

His eyes weary and tired, Muthuvel would smile as if thanking the pills and slowly drift into slumber.

But today he was not resorting to any pills when he heard the cough from downstairs. Neither did he turn off the lights, resigning himself to a thought: “Only one more day! Let me listen to what she has to say.” He arose from his bed and opened the room window. Bhagyam – contrary to her daily routine – suddenly stopped coughing. Maybe she figured out coughing tonight would serve no purpose; on the other hand, she might have felt no need to register her usual complaint.

Muthuvel recalled his family members – every one of them – now living in his household. He tried to take stock of them.

What a palatial house it was! It has been a long time since he stopped visiting all the rooms of that big house. Has he lost interest in his assets even as his responsibilities have multiplied? He could see all kinds of people now sitting or sleeping on the long verandas on both sides of the house. That would include his guests, male servants or others passing through the town.

Following the main entrance to the house – which was protected by a huge, elegantly hand-crafted wooden door, the visitor finds his way to the two sections of the house – the front and the rear. The front portion starts with large rooms - on either side -stocked with paddy bags and other feedstock. Walking further, the visitor comes across a large open space surrounded, on all four sides, by corridors. Standing there one can look up and see the open sky with protective iron railings covering the ceiling. Two large rooms, back to back, stood on either side of the corridor. Muthuvel's second wife Dakshayani lived in one of the rooms. She practically spent all her time in that room – including her customary daily worship. In the other room facing southward lived Dakshayani's daughter Vatsala with her husband and their kids. Muthuvel had two grand children through his daughter.

From the open space the visitor approaches the stairs leading to the library. The rear portion of the

house starts at this point and typically follows the same layout like the front. Standing near the window in his room upstairs, Muthuvel can easily watch Bhagyam's living quarters. Their son Sundaralingam and his wife Gomathy who have recently arrived from Madras occupied the room opposite to hers. The couple, Muthuvel felt, seemed frustrated because they were missing city life. They have been complaining ever since they moved to this house.

Some four years ago Sundaralingam – on his return from United States - had informed Muthuvel that he planned to start a business with another partner and he borrowed four hundred thousand rupees from his father-in-law. Apparently, that business is still thriving . . .

Sundaralingam and his wife had come only recently from Madras in response to a personal invitation from Muthuvel. The son always sides with his mother Bhagyam. The daughter-in-law – naturally inclined to oppose her mother-in-law – sides with Muthuvel's second wife Dakshayani. Dakshayani has a daughter who lives with her husband in the same household.

Apart from his close relatives through his two wives, Muthuvel's house was literally thrown open to many outsiders. They –mostly friends and acquaintances of his two wives - swarmed the place thanks to the wives' generosity and giddy pride. Muthuvel never bothered to find out exactly how many guests were enjoying his hospitality.

When Muthuvel, on some occasion, happened to show up those guests would stand up as a mark of respect and join both their palms in a symbolic gesture.

Beyond sporting a natural smile and making a few personal inquiries - about their families, welfare, and how their farms were thriving back home - Muthuvel evinced no particular interest in those guests. It mattered little to him how those guests' visits affected his family finances or the bottom line. Both his wives were free to do as they pleased; of course, he was acutely aware his wives remained unhappy despite the freedom and independence granted to them - this was evident from their mutual animosity and frequent quarrels with one another - so he tried to safeguard his own freedom and independence by distancing himself from them. This led to his wives getting even more resentful toward Muthuvel.

The upshot of all this is Muthuvel led a life he could be proud of. As the head of the family he adhered to his cherished principles and rules of conduct. As one who inherited ancestral wealth, he was able to enhance it. At the same time he refused to be bogged down by the obligations imposed upon him lest he should give up his principles. Yet, he never became a faddist or a victim to the ever-changing social mores; he honed his intellect to gain depth and purpose in his life. He knew exactly where he stood on everything under the sun. If it is true that one needed a new mindset and philosophy to demolish old myths and clichés, then he

exhibited such an outlook and courage. He was slave to no ideology, peer or social pressures, yet he won esteem from all social circles that admired him as an exemplary individual.

Accordingly, he found himself serving his community in many roles – as a temple trustee, member of the local Lions Club and as an honorary magistrate. Still, he was hardly touched by any of the ills that corrupted the social elite or other big-wigs around him. Muthuvel had no problem mixing with the company of his peers who were made of a different stock; it didn't matter to him that they were mostly involved in hustling, wining and dining in their day-to-day affairs. Muthuvel could easily keep company with them for several hours with hardly a frown or scowl on his face – while never compromising any of his own cherished principles.

That was possible because he steadfastly tried to achieve the ideals he sought in all his endeavors. The fact that he spent most of his time in the library didn't make him an impractical bookworm. There were no contradictions between his ideals and his personal behavior.

Till recently his social milieu seemed to respect his judgment and opinions. But of late the whole town appears to be at odds with him.

Muthuvel had become a topic of scandal and ridicule everywhere – in temples, riverbanks, colleges, the city clubs, and even in his own house – that is, wherever people met in a social gathering.

How did this happen? Was there a conflict between his intellect and his behavior? Or was it a conflict between individual freedom and social oppression?

The simple explanation is if one were to accept the time-honored clichés as gospels of truth it goes without saying that the dawn of wisdom would be seen as a bad omen.

Now, Muthuvel is ready to sacrifice his wealth, status and embark on a second life and move away from his present surroundings; what concerns him is he might leave room for speculation that he was running away from the community to avoid any criticism from those elitists who arrogate to themselves as the spokesmen of the society. He would never let that happen.

After turning off all the lights in the library except the one on the table, he affectionately pats Sardar and orders him to retire under the bed. Then he sits on the bed and begins his diary:

*'I am addressing this diary to you. Any person apart from me can be addressed only with such a designation. You are a stranger to me, but this diary is meant only for you. You must be pleased that I am addressing you as an individual – not a faceless crowd. A crowd would never be able to grasp the truth. The crowd relishes a spectator sport; it tries to manipulate the weak and the unwary – often forcing them to commit a crime. If it is totally opposed to something that you consider your lifetime goal it will lose no opportunity to ac-*

*cuse you of indulging in an illegal act and condemn you.*

*The society is made of individuals. Society has awesome power as well as weakness. But it will never, never admit the individual any power. Neither will the society tolerate an individual displaying weakness. This is a social norm based on conventional wisdom. While this seems obvious one rarely finds an individual who dares to question or oppose this state of affairs. Why —because the individual's fight would be of no avail. Society might be able to render justice to the aggrieved party in a dispute between two individuals; but in a dispute between the society and the individual it would make no sense to expect any justice. So I want personally to meet with each and every individual of this society – not because I want your judgment but to declare mine. Please understand me when I say I am not trying to preach a common – all embracing moral code - to the society or the individual. This is how I see things within my moral framework. I am not trying to impose my view on any member of this society. This is my personal creed – which neither tries to dominate nor intrude into another's mindset.*

*My personal creed defines who I am and it is not affected by present or future obligations to others – individuals or the society. This is no selfish dogma; simply put, my personal creed doesn't seek to deny others' values or what they stand for. Those who betray their own creed can hardly be expected to protect those of others.*



*Now you may think there is nothing in the world you would like to know about me; if you stay away from me because you don't want to pass any judgment on me or my actions, I too would reciprocate your gesture and respect you. On the other hand, if you happen to be one of the elite - who take upon themselves to pass, rightly or wrongly, judgments about me, then I would urge you to hear me out. Remember this: there is a lot I need to learn about myself, and the same holds for you. So, to claim you know everything about me is a big lie!*

*I have become a fodder for every gossip! Some gossip!*

*They claim I have ceased to be a respectable citizen and am now fast descending into depravity. While married to two women, pure and decent, they allege I have been now seduced by a wayward woman. At a time when I can call myself a grandparent, they say I am corrupted by a young woman; that I am a phony trying to fool this world by lecturing from a high moral ground . . .*

*Recent weeks brought me these barbs – sometimes overheard in a conversation or when coming face to face with someone caught in an awkward posture marked by silence or a suppressed laughter. For someone who was accustomed, by intent or otherwise, to enjoy the respect and affection of this community for the last fifty years, this comes as a rude shock. I feel hurt and fester inside.*

*Is it true? Was I seduced by a younger woman –*

*while married to two pure and decent women? Is it true?’*

Once again, the moan from Bhagyam, downstairs, is heard – shrill and hoarse. Muthuvel stops writing and raises his head, broadly smiling.

“The women in our society have learnt whining and complaining as a lesson and perfected them into an art form,” he tells himself. “How sadistic!” He lets out a deep sigh, followed by a grumble, “Poor Bhagyam!”

He accepts, albeit with a certain pain, that Bhagyam is his wife. Such a relationship between them had been established several years before their union was formally legitimized. Bhagyam’s mother – an aunt of Muthuvel’s – had been married into a wealthy family, but became a widow at an early age. With her only daughter Bhagyam – a year younger to Muthuvel – she permanently returned to her parents’ house. The elders in the family wanted to uphold a tradition – which meant the property rights must stay within their own family circles – and accordingly brought up the children, Muthuvel and Bhagyam, as husband and wife.

When Muthuvel was ten years old, there was a huge celebration in their house – it reminded him of the village carnival. The entire village population seemed lodged in their house; the main thoroughfares were commandeered and buried under colorful, festive canopies to accommodate guests from far and near. The special orchestra band

hired from the neighboring city as well as the local musicians specially invited to perform at the wedding were enough to publicize the grand event. Muthuvel was so pleased when he donned a velvet cap, coat and trousers – the pockets bulging with candies. Bhagyam too welcomed the opportunity – when she, dressed in a special silk bridal suit and blouse, could simply walk into a room and grab any candy within her reach. The pair found themselves in a playful mood and inevitably got into some childish quarrels.

“Grandpa, see what Muthu is up to! He is grabbing my ponytail! Hi, Muthu, leave me alone.” As the girl bursts into tears when forcibly caught in Muthuvel’s tight grip, the grandfather tried to calm them and explain the new relationship emerging between them:

“My dear girl, Muthu is your husband; you are not supposed to utter his name. You must call him ‘*Athan*’. You must show him respect, should not use the singular while addressing him,” grandfather tells her. “Muthu, this goes for you too! Bhagyam is your wife, you must treat her with love and affection, not tease her.” He invited both the children to sit on his lap, facing one another, and began his lessons.

First, he addressed Bhagyam, and said: “Okay, say ‘*Athan* . . .’

“No, I won’t.”

“Hi Muthu, how about you? Go ahead, and say it!”

*“Athan.”*

“You stupid fellow, she was supposed to say that. She is your wife. You should address her as “Bhagyam.”

“Wife Bhagyam.”

Grandfather was not quite happy at Muthuvel addressing Bhagyam that way; still he didn't know how to correct him. He thought time would eventually solve these little concerns.

Later, the grandfather went away to Benaras, where he lived for many years. Next to the grandfather others in the family circles tried their best to perpetuate the marital relationship between Muthuvel and Bhagyam.

That relationship existed in name only. It did nothing to foster any special meaning in what Muthuvel and Bhagyam felt for one another.

A huge bullock cart stands in front of the house. Muthuvel, the bridegroom and Bhagyam, his bride, are getting ready to go to school. As the cart makes its way to the school with the young ones decked in their marital costumes, the couple seems to relish the whole experience —as fun. On his way to school, Muthuvel would sometimes notice his boyhood friend Vaitha resting at his home – on the veranda; occasionally Vaitha too would join him and get a ride to the school - if the servants obliged.

At school . . . . .

“Hi Muthu, your sister is crying,” one of the students would announce.

“She is not his sister, she is his wife,” another would declare-provoking laughter from all students. Blushing, Muthuvel would burst into tears when Vaitha came with a good idea: “Let Bhagyam be your wife at home; in school think of her as your sister.”

Playing the family games is not a right reserved for the society only. Innocent children too can invent them.

The game between the home front and the school ended with the home front winning when Bhagyam at sixteen entered the fifth standard; Muthuvel was seventeen and studying in the seventh standard.

‘What a perverse and dangerous game it was! Our parents and elders had no qualms about imprisoning us in such a cruel, disgusting hell! At the time Bhagyam and I did not grasp the full implications of that horror, neither did we, in later years, completely grow out of our puerile instincts. My wife and I were in no position to assume the marital responsibilities thrust upon us, so we treated the whole thing as a game. I would sometimes recall those farm animals, which were forced to mate with one another – that would best summarize our conjugal life.

When I was eighteen, I had to carry on the family tradition and thus shoulder the responsibilities of my ancestral property. After my father breathed

his last with the knowledge that I came off age and was ready to succeed him, no one seemed to bother about my education. My ancestral property was considerable – it would take care of at least the next nine generations – without a single nod from me to enhance it. My ancestors considered such ‘freedom’ a family relic worth preserving. How can I possibly defy such time-honored tradition?

If one could imagine anything epitomizing indolence and inertia, it would be the life I was then leading.

“How are you doing? Do you remember me?” It was a voice trying to renew our old friendship as Vaitha stood, one summer afternoon, his hair pulled into a tuft, the upper torso wrapped in a silk shawl, his sparkling eyes steadied on me for a long time, when I was resting on a veranda in my house under a canopy – my back against a bamboo pillar. It was that encounter which saved me from sliding further into the swamp bred on indolence and inertia.’

‘How unfortunate his picture is missing from among all these on these walls?’ Muthuvel’s eyes sparkled at the usual memory of Vaitha. Sighing, he raised his head and looked ahead.

He recalled the boy who went to school with him– a Brahmin kid with a ponytail, his upper body shirtless but smeared with sacred ash and invested with a sacred thread. The rest of his attire consisted of a fading *dhoti* that almost reached to

his ankles. Muthuvel recalled the boy who, carrying a load of books and a lunch box, rushed toward the bullock cart on its way to school. But then Muthuvel lost touch with Vaitha for nearly five years, until one day when he suddenly showed up – in the posture of Lord Krishna playing the flute - with his left foot slightly raised and the right foot leaning on the floor. Even now he could still vividly recall Vaitha addressing him in that posture . .

“Who is that?” For a moment Muthuvel couldn’t recognize the visitor.

“Come in, why all these formalities?” Excited, Muthuvel shouted as if gathering the entire village.

He could understand Vaitha stayed away from Muthuvel all these years because he was averse to renew their friendship – based strictly on the fact they were childhood classmates. Muthuvel felt he was able to draw the hesitant Vaitha to his company in one magnetic pull.

The more he looked at the visitor the more he was amazed. For a moment the two friends forgot to make any enquiries about one another – and simply kept smiling at one another.

“Do you remember?” Muthuvel asked, as if recalling a past event.

“Remember we once went to the temple premises to steal some fruits?” Vaitha recalled the punishment that was meted out to them - from the teacher who wielded his cane.

“How is our teacher back in the village doing –

remember we used to call him the teacher with crooked teeth?" Muthuvel inquired.

"Well, he seems to have lost all his teeth," Vaitha replied, "but he is still known by the same name." Both the friends broke into a laugh simultaneously.

How does one feel when all the burdens and concerns seem to just vanish with Vaitha around!

'All this wealth and prosperity are at his disposal – why would he worry about anything?' That was exactly what Vaitha thought about Muthuvel.

Muthuvel too never opened up to Vaitha about his personal life. He had neither the will nor the courage to speak out.

He was ashamed to talk about his marital problems festering inside; he was looking for some remedy to free himself from the mental anguish.

They talked about their school days –including people and events from their past – often oblivious to their current age and status. They lost themselves in nostalgia – as they recalled their former school teacher as well as the old woman who sold candies at the school entrance; the old creek that students used for swimming lessons and has since become an attraction site in the new park; and how the playground where the boys used to gather on Sunday afternoons had now stretched beyond the *Iyengar* temple.

It took them two full days to return from the memory lane to the current scene. Only then did



they make inquiries about one another.

Vaitha had no living relatives in the village. He had a grandmother, who lived alone, and passed away a week earlier. Vaitha inherited her small, tiled-roof house because he was the only survivor who performed the last rites for her. Vaitha thought of Muthuvel when he decided to go for higher studies.

‘Maybe Muthuvel still remembers me as his classmate – then I can try to renew our friendship; otherwise, I will discuss with him a business proposition – the sale of my house.’ That was very much in Vaitha’s mind when he came to see Muthuvel.

‘I had been brought up with a notion that education is something people got when they are struggling to make a living and are looking for a means to secure a monthly income. Vaitha destroyed that notion in no time – and enlightened me on what real education actually meant.

The boyhood-friend who fondly addressed and hugged me was no ordinary soul ; he was the embodiment of wisdom. His visit freed me from all the illusions surrounding me. What I was doing – ordering servants, protecting and enhancing the landed property – is this life? Why can’t I just give up this boredom and join Vaitha as a student? – such a feeling was deeply ingrained in me. But how could I? Vaitha had finished his Intermediate Exam, and I have never gone beyond my seventh grade. When I expressed my doubts rather halt-

ingly, Vaitha opened my eyes – and his advice was a source of great strength. I would never forget his words.

He said:

“No college or school has ever produced men of wisdom. If your ancestors harbored some negative views about formal education, they are not entirely to be blamed. What currently passes for education in our country – this formal English education – was planned and implemented by an Englishman called Lord Macaulay. What he expressed in some elegant phrases, your ancestors had stated in some homespun language: ‘The fundamental aim of this educational system is to produce a cadre of English-speaking citizens who would remain steadfastly loyal to England.’ So if your ancestors thought such an education would produce only clerks, they are not entirely wrong. Neither age nor status should stand in one’s way in his quest for knowledge or wisdom; in fact it is a moral obligation of every citizen. I too was brought up in the tradition of the British system, but you are blessed with even better opportunities to attain education. I have studied more in libraries than from the classrooms. Had I been blessed with more money . . . .” His eyes were closed, his quest for wisdom seemed caught up in a dream . . .

“What if you had money?” I intervened.

“What more do I need? I can have a library that lasts a lifetime! Do you know what kinds of books are available in this world?” As he went on and on

– he talked about books, their breadth and variety, for days.

On that occasion he stayed with me for a week. Then he made several more visits, and I chose him as my mentor. He too acted as my mentor – speaking to me as a student and freely dispensing wisdom. It was he who founded this library.

Then, after three years, when he was doing his B.A., he visited me for the holidays and fell ill with pneumonia. He was reading - even when he was sick and confined to bed. When he couldn't, he would ask me to read, and listen.

Then, very proud, and satisfied that he made Muthuvel an intellectual person, Vaitha breathed his last.

What am I doing? I am slowly getting distracted – thinking about Vaitha!'

Muthuvel comes to his full realization and directs a flashlight against the clock on the wall.

The clock on the wall reads a few minutes past two.

He fully savors that moment.

'As of today I am ending one phase of my life and embarking on another. What would the world make of this? People are already talking about me. Some talk! I wanted to disclose my side of the story – even if others are either willing or unwilling to accept my arguments. So I am penning this

diary. While others may not see things exactly as I do or feel about them as intensely as I do, they deserve to get at least a superficial understanding of my story. Now, when I recall these past events, what stays with me is not a sense of sorrow; all things considered, I do feel gratified. I do feel a lot to be desired in my personal life, but here again, I have no regrets, either now or in the past. It was indeed a horror when at twelve I got married to Bhagyam, and when I turned seventeen I had to cope with full-blown obligations of matrimony. At the time Bhagyam was sixteen, though she had grown into a full-bodied woman, mentally she was a child – just like I was. Maybe that was the reason why the elders in the family were dropping all kinds of hints and suggestions – some couched in mild, off-color expressions, and others in blatant, vulgar remarks. Good heavens, why are these men so callow and unsophisticated when it comes to the facts of life! Sex! How many books have been written on the subject! Starting from Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis to the recent work of Dr. Kinsey, how many have explored that subject – their books filling up many shelves!. The Kinsey report is said to be based on direct interviews with 5,940 women – touching upon all the aspects of their sexual behavior – covered extensively and in depth. Can you imagine Indian women, especially Tamil women, ever directly and courageously encountering their inner, private feelings? As for the foreign women- whatever may be their social condition – they are willing to examine their sexual experiences in these modern times. Here, a man

faces the most impossible task of his life – understanding his own wife! Here sex is considered as an unavoidable sin, to be indulged in secret and on the sly. To talk about sex is considered disgusting and consequently we are trapped in permanent, total ignorance. When you read books, sex does not feel like what you think. As far as I am concerned, sex is not an experience; it's only knowledge! But, in recent days, at my age of fifty, sex has become an experience. In my marital life, sex has remained a sad, disgraceful, horrible experience that has completely destroyed my self-esteem.

Those horrible nights spent with Bhagyam – starting from our first night to the subsequent ones – every one of them . . . Why do I get this recurring nightmare?’

He wonders why his personal sex life turned into a disaster. No other person would be able to find an answer that would satisfy Muthuvel. And at this point in his life he did not care to find one either.

Bhagyam arrived as his wife when she was sixteen years old. She had grown up in the village – an embodiment of a culture that in the last thirty years fashioned her outlook about beauty and civilized behavior. She was always picking on Muthuvel. Even the day they were married, she quarreled with him and her aunt took her to task:

“Hey, Bhagyam, how come you are getting into fights with him all the time? Don’t you know he is

your husband? Onlookers are laughing at you!”

“Why not? Why should he pour water on me – getting me all wet?”

“I have told you thousands times that you should never address him in the singular,” the aunt admonished Bhagyam while fondly pinching her cheek. “You must show him respect.”

“Some respect!” Bhagyam made a face and lowered her head down as if disciplined, and entered Muthuvel’s room. Muthuvel could hear his heart pounding.

Muthuvel could understand what was going on, so did Bhagyam. But they both seemed to hate the outcome of their meeting as something of a horror - a throwback to what the elders deemed a secret dirty business. Muthuvel was feeling uneasy since that morning – he just wanted to flee to some far away place. Occasionally he burst into tears – and when it dawned upon him that he could never escape from the ‘conspiracy’ the ensuing encounter seemed a horrible experience. Then he reassured himself: “Why should I fear –we are after all talking about our Bhagyam. I may have to endure this agony just for one night. We are both sharing the night only because our elders want us to. What’s the big deal?”

Bhagyam entered the room when Muthuvel was mentally struggling with himself. The room door slammed shut soon after her entrance. She raised her head and looked at him – as if throwing off all her pretensions to the winds. Muthuvel stared

back at her.

“Oh! Look at that face!” she mocked him. Maybe that was the only way she could express her love for her husband.

“If you don’t like my face, why do you keep looking at me?” Muthuvel shot back.

“Do you think you are a great beauty?” He was actually overcome by disgust as he continued to watch her.

They remained silent, sitting away from one another. Muthuvel turned around and keenly examined her.

‘Why do I have to hate her? Is that feeling actually hatred, do I really hate her?’ He grappled with his thoughts while casting an empty look at her. “What if she was married to somebody else?” he thought. Such a feeling revealed to him he didn’t really hate her.

He knew their marriage was based on a simple premise that his aunt’s property must remain within the family. He realized the truth that Bhagyam is his wife, he her husband – a relationship carefully built and nourished over the last five years. They couldn’t continue their past relationship at school of a brother and sister – any more. But it bothered him to realize that Bhagyam didn’t seem to show any respect or affection toward him.

‘As her husband, I have to take the initiative and establish our relationship; otherwise, she will find out I am not interested in her . . . She will suf-

fer for the rest of her life . . .’

“Bhagyam?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you mad at me?”

“I am not mad at you! I don’t like any of this.”

“I too feel the same way . . . What can we do?”

“Why are you lying to me ? You are happy that you are free to do anything you want with me”

“No, no, I am not at all happy about this whole thing.”

“They are saying I shouldn’t address you in the singular . .

“Yes, I know . . .”

“I can’t bring myself to addressing you any other way. . .”

“I have an idea. When we are together, you can address me in the singular. When people are around, you can call me in the plural.”

“You consider that an honor . . .”

Muthuvel remained silent.

“Are we now husband and wife?”

“No, not yet.”

“What do you mean, we already got married a long time ago!”

“But we had no nuptials; that’s only today.”

“What is that?”



“You really don’t know? Tell me, I can teach you.”

“No, you don’t have to teach me anything! You have no shame!”

“It is because we don’t need to feel shame or embarrassment with one another, we have been locked up in this room.” So saying, Muthu pressed both his hands on her shoulders. She instantly freed herself from his hands and stood up.

“Do you know you are my wife?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“That’s why I want to . . .”

“No, I will not! . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“I will never . . .”

“Aren’t you my wife?”

“Yes, I am your wife, my parents conspired and . . .” She started crying.

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t like it!”

“Remember, whether we like it or not, we are supposed to live together . . . We must remain together till our death . . .”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“You must listen to my advice. You must show me love and affection. I too will show you love

and affection. Then . . .”

“No, I won’t!”

“Don’t you think we must find out . . . What it is really like? . . .”

He was consumed by one burning desire – natural to a male. She was consumed by a vague fear – common to every woman, so every inch of her body trembled. Finally, nature took its course – both of them overtaken by an instinct that intensified in the ensuing darkness.

She dug her nails into his shoulders, scratched the surface hard and pushed him away. He got mad. He knew how to handle his classmates when they challenged him to a fight. Now he forcibly pinned her down and made demands on her as if seeking revenge for humiliating him . . .

He succeeded only in proving he was a man. But he spent the rest of the night in silence and occasional sobs. She got mad with him and spent the night sleeping on the floor.

Now, as he recalled that past event and his own conduct Muthuvel recoils in disgust. He lets out a deep sigh and continues his diary:

*When Vaitha visited me, Bhagyam had just delivered her first baby. Sundaralingam – my son, who this morning, denounced me for my conduct and complained that I am responsible for subjecting him to unbearable pain and dishonor– was then a ten-day old baby. I remember how Bhag-*

*yam cursed me for all the pain and suffering she had endured in her delivery. Our very first night as well those we spent together were mostly sorrowful. Soon my mind was in turmoil, and I asked myself, as if trying to understand a puzzle, "Why do men hanker after sex?" I realized the nights I had stayed away from Bhagyam testified to my strength and those spent in her company to my weakness. That was the plain truth; we both dreaded to face one another. Still, instinctively, we were attracted to one another; once we understood we were living in a world of illusion, we longed to get away from one another. All this had nothing to do with sex. Meanwhile, we celebrated the birth of our baby. I believed the only way I could keep Bhagyam happy was to keep away from her; I tried hard but failed – again and again – my weakness getting the better of my will power. We were both caught in a whirl of mutual hatred and bitterness – that was the time Vaitha came into my life and helped me divert my whole attention in another direction.*

*I spent all my days and nights in his company – studying and learning.*

*During the days when I stayed away from Bhagyam I realized I had mistakenly thought she had singled me out as a target for her anger and frustrations using every opportunity to pick up a fight with me at her own whim and fancy. I was a little confused: did I realize this because of my isolation from Bhagyam or did my very isolation breed this behavior in her? So I examined her and our relationship with certain diligence and pa-*

*tience. Soon, I began to feel compassion and sympathy for her; wasn't she my childhood friend, after all? Nowadays, when we are together or with others, she addresses me in the singular. She has grown obese and looks slightly older than me. She spends all her time cursing and blaming others for what life has handed over to her. If I don't, who else will show her sympathy?*

*These days, when she finds no target to vent her frustrations, Bhagyam climbs the stairs – huffing and puffing – and confronts me in my study. She simply stands near the table where I am engaged in studying or writing, gestures with both her hands toward me and gives vent to a litany of complaints for half an hour, occasionally interrupted by weeping and cursing, feels satisfied with her performance and returns to her other chores. I have gone through this charade for many years; still I can never make out the source or the cause behind her complaint - mainly because I automatically tune myself out when facing her ferocity. Bhagyam thinks I am listening to everything she wants to say and that I am speechless when she bombards me with a few unassailable questions. Poor Bhagyam! Let her suffer those illusions! After all these years I am willing to grant her that privilege. On earlier occasions, I did feel some guilt and remorse for acting rather selfishly; I was willing to forego that selfishness if it helped Bhagyam in any way. My selfishness, in the final analysis, helped me protect me first and then my wife.*

*To Bhagyam sex was neither an experience nor*

*knowledge. Because taboos were imposed on her even before she could develop some healthy attitude about sex, she – like me – recoiled with disgust where gender issues were concerned. Sex is not just the physical relationship, but as far as Bhagyam and I were concerned, it remained purely at that level. She had no interest in sex, to begin with, so it bred in her a permanent state of boredom. It is the human body that is subject to external pressures, and a woman can be controlled only to the extent she is willing to cooperate. In case of Bhagyam she had never been ‘obsessed’ with what she considered this ‘kinky human behavior;’ essentially poor in imagination and unable to realize she has choices to make, Bhagyam was steeped into traditional notions of family values such as chastity, unwavering loyalty, devotion, etc. Her day-to-day reactions –the constant bickering and rapid mood swings – profoundly affected her role in our conjugal life. She became one of the millions of women – victims, who possess neither the mental capacity nor the spiritual vigor to cast off the chains imprisoning them in a life expounded by the ‘social elite’.*

*I fully understand what she is going through, but I too can’t rescue her from this crisis. Neither can other women – who are victims like her- be of any help to her. Meanwhile, Bhagyam follows a life of a traditional Indian woman – spending her time in prayers and strictly observing all kinds of religious practices – to be blessed with a wish dear to all Indian women: to pre-decease their husbands. Bhagyam has successfully fulfilled all*

*the obligations to be worshipped as a temple deity; but what about her role as a wife?*

*Deities reside in temples only; they are not part of our day-to-day social interaction. Neither Bhagyam nor I can be held responsible for the impasse in our marriage. Still, does it mean I should continue to suffer in marriage, just like Bhagyam? Hasn't the society conferred certain privileges to men? So, when I turned twenty-five, I decided to have a second marriage. At the time my decision was seen as a totally moral act; people in my status and power didn't opt for a second marriage as an outlet for their sexual needs. But I was not interested in any extra-marital affairs. So I insisted on a second marriage, and everyone, including Bhagyam, felt a man was surely entitled to such a privilege.*

“How could I have done such a crazy thing?” Muthuvel grumbled and smiled to himself.

The time was thirty minutes past three.

A rooster's first call heralding the day was heard afar. That was followed by the sound of a train, now audible from close quarters, leaving a railroad station a mile away from the village. Muthuvel felt acute backache for having sat too long in his chair; he got up, helped himself with a glass of water and, immersed in some thought, approached a window from where he could peer down into the street below. Cool breeze played on his cheeks while he stared at the long, empty street winding

down the street.

The house at the farthest corner of the street – its whitewashed walls glowing in the moonlight – belonged to Dakshayani’s mother. Neither Dakshayani nor her parents were originally from this village. Dakshayani’s father used to work in a state forest agency, and after his retirement, he settled down in this village.

Muthuvel wanted a second marriage – with Dakshayani – only after he personally met with her and felt in his heart she would make a good wife; he also wanted Dakshayani to express her frank opinion about her prospective husband.

He had seen Dakshayani a few times when he observed her among a bevy of women on their way to the temple when Muthuvel –perched on a bench in a summer evening - was supervising his men at work. A few other times, actually twice, when the bullock cart he was riding crossed her house, he noticed Dakshayani busily working a *kolam* - colorful designs with rice flour – drawn on the ground - and who, as soon as she heard the chimes of the bells from the bullock cart, got up and let the cart pass by. For a young man always accustomed to noticing the same young women – invariably every one of them a blood relative – in his daily routine, Dakshayani, a young newcomer, was a breath of fresh air. Of course, there were other matters to be considered – her caste, her ancestors, their credentials, and so on. But if a village bigwig is truly interested in an alliance, these qualifications have a way of finding ready enthusi-

asts and advocates, don't they?

Finally Muthuvel made a personal visit to Dakshayani's house. He knew he had seen her, but what does she actually think of him? So he insisted that they should meet with one another – face to face; that was something quite revolutionary in the local community!

Unlike Bhagyam, Dakshayani was a product of urban life and she was literate enough to read novels. When Muthuvel entered her house he was pleased to notice the tapestry displayed at the main entrance – made of colorful glass tubes supporting an artistically woven fabric; inside, on the room walls hung other designs made out of colorful threads and beads – with Dakshayani's name engraved on them. Highly impressed, Muthuvel couldn't help muttering to himself, "Dakshayani is indeed a great connoisseur of art."

As he recalled that event – his visit to Dakshayani's – Muthuvel hurries back to the table and pens the following in his diary:

*It would appear the artistic impulses of our women in general - their appreciation of art, beauty and the humanity in general – are sacrificed at the altar of their marriage.*

*I have learnt from my own marriage and from other personal observations that women in general share a common trait – whether they are educated or uneducated, whether they come from a rural or urban background.*



*The very moment a woman is born, the society condemns her to an eternal ordeal: she is treated as a second-class citizen; to the extent she needs more ornaments and embellishments than a man, she also carries additional burdens and is subjected to more restraints and controls; to the extent her body is imprisoned, her feelings are also ravaged; her world remains narrow and limited – just like her own mind that is subject to manipulation; at every stage of her life a woman is reduced to act as a slave to serve another man – and except for her husband who is deemed to be her master, she has no responsibility toward other men. So till she happens to meet with her future husband to whom she owes responsibility, she employs all the survival tactics natural to a woman; in marriage she gets a sense that the man is her equal, a partner and also her slave. This breeds in her mind – unconsciously – a perverse pleasure. The higher the husband reaches in the social ladder, the more she feels she is justified in bringing him down in their intimate, personal relationship. She thus sets in motion what soon becomes a series of unintended consequences. Can you imagine what the driving force is behind her dogged determination to justify her action? It is what our ancient scriptures, literature and epics have been lecturing and drilling into our ears – her chastity!*

*Can't this stupid society expect anything else from our womenfolk? It is acceptable if a woman remains a bad wife, a bad mother, and a malaise of this society. All she needs to do is to avoid any sexual relations with any man, other than her hus-*

*band, either before or after marriage. That makes her a paragon of virtue! A goddess! Our society has been quite successful in breeding women who fit this description. Those women, while successfully upholding this virtue, have ended up as the cruel enemies of their husbands.*

*Every marriage – conducted in whatever form or manner to formalize the union between a man and woman – either in a religious ceremony or any other social setup – doesn't deny the above litmus test. All said and done, a marriage is, essentially, a ritual!*

*So, in retrospect, I realize my decision for a second marriage, was a foolish one. When a marriage legitimized in a ritual under the principle 'one man – one wife' is mercilessly exposed to assaults against one's self-esteem from so many fronts, how did I ever hope to find peace and harmony – in my new conjugal life - with two women?*

*In the early days of my second marriage, these two women reacted with a good measure of graciousness and understanding. I was not quite surprised by Bhagyam's attitude – who seemed to have imagined her sex life had come to an end and thus adapted a new role of a good mother-in-law; Dakshayani, as soon as we were declared husband and wife, lost no time in greeting Bhagyam, profusely, as 'my beloved sister.'*

*I was sickened to watch how these women could act so pretentious, lying to themselves and to one another. Could that be what lies at the root of a*

*slavish mentality?*

*Do you know the horrible truth? Even when women profess unity and cooperation among themselves – it is all just phony, any way – or when they become violent enemies, they never give up their common trait – seeking revenge against men!*

*Any way, the early days following my second marriage, brought peace and harmony into my life. I enjoyed brief spells of tranquility. But it was a big lie! A cruel deception!*

*Dakshayani was soon caught in a two-track mind. 'I am after all his second wife,' she told herself hurting her self esteem. She countered that thought saying, with certain pride and arrogance, 'My husband needs me because he finds something missing in his first wife' I found these sentiments weighing heavily on her mind.*

*Soon her artistic impulses – her tastes and appreciation for art and beauty – seemed to have totally deserted her.*

*I tried to remind her, saying, "Why did you give up all those wonderful skills? I hoped you would bring those natural skills to this house of ours – turning it into a dream house." When I expressed my sadness by adding, "You also used to dress yourself up so beautifully and looked like a paragon of beauty," she reacted with a curt, harsh reply – to my face, dashing all my hopes: "I am not a whore."*

*That was the end of my conversation about art with Dakshayani.*

*Soon I came to realize that Dakshayani and Bhagyam had only one goal uppermost in their minds – to engage in mutual fight with one another.*

*At the time I didn't foresee how that initial semblance of peace and harmony following my second marriage would soon give way to permanent discord and turmoil. When people lead phony lives - masking their true feelings - there comes about an ordinary, routine event that totally exposes their hypocrisy . . .*

*Dakshayani had been home for more than a year. At the time she was pregnant – well into three or four months . . .*

Muthuvel rubs his eyes and eyebrows – he feels overcome by utter disgust as he recalls that event.

Muthuvel and Bhagyam were sharing a private moment in their bedroom. There was a welcome lull in their ongoing bickering and arguments culminating in Bhagyam finally, albeit slowly, coming around. . . .

It was one of those nights when Muthuvel's weakness got the better of his will power. The very reason for his second marriage made him show an extra consideration to Bhagyam and act nicer to her; he didn't want her to imagine she has been totally alienated from him. He tried and succeeded

in overcoming her feigned reluctance, when a knock was heard on the door. From its very sound, Muthuvel understood how humiliating and uncivilized it was!

Till now, no one among his family members could dare intrude into their privacy – at such an hour and in that manner. He cringed with shame realizing it was he who made such a rude interference now possible – which made him look even more pathetic in Bhagyam’s eyes. What a horror! He had to grovel like an intruder in his own home, in the presence of his own wife! Trying to make the best of the situation, he fondly pinched Bhagyam’s cheeks and spoke to her as if begging: “Don’t say anything. It is Dakshayani, I will deal with her.” Even as he mumbled those words the knock on the door grew louder — totally emasculating him.

Humiliated, virtually reduced to the status of a slave, the man of the house changed into new clothes, rushed to the door and opened it.

Dakshayani stood there – true to her form.

Like a moneylender confronting his target and demanding immediate payment, she tugged at his lap and yelled: “Why did you marry me?”

It was unclear from her tone if the question arose on the spur of the moment or had been festering within her for sometime. She must have thought of it the very first day of their marriage. Given their current marital situation, Muthuvel thought, was he the only one to be blamed for this

state of affairs?

He mumbled an answer: “You are right, I am guilty. I should have never got into this marriage. The fact I married a second time makes it a gross injustice.” As he blurted out his confession to Dakshayani with Bhagyam watching him, he groveled like a boy - being avenged for all the injustice that men had inflicted upon women— generation after generation.

Bhagyam spat behind him as he walked out of the room. Muthuvel went to his room upstairs and shut himself in. Bhagyam and Dakshayani began exchanging epithets - crude and vulgar - that lasted for a long time late into the night. Hearing them, Muthuvel could only curse his fate for being born a male, and shed tears - in secret and silence.

*Following that incident, I realized a truth: whether it was Bhagyam or Dakshayani - the days I could stay away from them testified to my strength and the nights I shared with them exposed my weakness. If either one of them had chosen to spend the night with me - it was done not because the woman's love for me; it had to do with the jealousy and bitterness both women had cultivated between themselves. I was a willing participant in this charade- but the price I had paid was huge: I was not only robbed of my physical sensation but suffered an anguished soul.*

*Bhagyam nursed a sort of perverse satisfaction in reminding herself that she was my first wife and*

*hailed from a wealthy family. Dakshayani, on the other hand, had an entirely different perspective: What if Bhagyam could boast of wealth and fame? The fact that I had felt a need for a second wife boosted her ego. As for me I felt like a 'little guy' trapped between these two egotists. My marriage has been reduced to a tragedy within this triangle. I was determined to extricate my personal life from this tragic descent, so I channeled my time and efforts in other pursuits.*

*Consequently, I now own buses that ply in some twenty routes in my district; I own movie theaters in six cities. I have a thousand men and women working in my cotton mill right in this town. Bullock carts are now a thing of the past; now there are four huge cars at my disposal. I have considerable wealth and savings, but what am I supposed to do with them? I am struggling hard to find – within myself - personal happiness and peace of mind. I spend a major part of my life in this library. I live with a sense of horror at the punishment meted out to me and pass my life in this self-imposed exile. The society, in return, rewards me with recognition and honor. Despite myself, I am forced to accept these rewards. Who is privy to my silent, secret anguish? I have struggled hard to keep it to myself. I have come to accept that in the last phase of my fifty years of life I was committing suicide – slowly murdering my soul. I nearly succeeded in my effort, when I suddenly met her.*

*'Suguna . . .'*

Muthuvel met her when she showed up as one

of the applicants for a teacher's position in one of the high schools under Muthuvel's administrative control. Hers was the only application that came with no recommendation, and that was the main reason why it attracted Muthuvel's attention. He was quite surprised as he examined her professional background: in her twenty-year career she had barely worked continuously for more than three years in any single institution; even this occurred quite early in her career – in only two schools. Subsequently, she had worked for a year or less in every school mentioned in her resume. Amused and a little wondering, "What kind of person with these credentials dares to show up for interview?" Muthuvel rang the bell when the office boy showed up.

"There is a lady by name Suguna waiting outside - to be interviewed. Ask her to come in," he ordered. "Ask others in the room to keep quiet." He began imagining how the visitor might look.

He imagined she would probably show up with some elegant teeth. Other attributes could include - gold-rim spectacles; a khaki bag; the ubiquitous umbrella; hair with nearly half turning gray and sheathed into a bunch – that's how he has always found female teacher applicants.

'Get ready for some new experience,' seemed to be a new message as the prospective teacher walked into the room parting the two-panel door that hid her from face to the knee.

"Good morning!"



“Good Morning!”

Even before he offered her a seat she took the chair in front of the table. Muthuvel began wondering, “Had the office boy, by mistake, shown in someone other than Suguna?”

He noticed her simple appearance as well as the sparkle in her eyes – something he was familiar with in the eyes of his boyhood friend Vaitha. Her appearance and figure betrayed her age – she could be forty. Yet she created an impression that one could be forty and still look young; what is more, Muthuvel felt, he was looking at someone eternally young.

He felt the gray patch that ran close to the hair parted in the middle signaled her maturity, not her age.

‘Who knows? She might set a trend for others,’ Muthuvel thought. ‘It might soon become fashionable to sport artificial gray hair.’

Setting aside his ready admiration for her, he assumed his official demeanor and keenly examined her application and credentials. He raised his head and stared at her, while thinking to himself:

‘She has completed her Intermediate but why has she chosen to go for secondary grade training? How come, even after twenty years of service, she has no career advancement to speak of? Why is there no sense of permanence in her professional career?’

“It seems to me so far you never held any per-

manent position in any school. Am I right?" he questioned her.

"Yes, it has to do with my character."

"Character \_\_\_?"

"Yes, no school has ever denied that I was the best teacher among their staff. But when the management tried to interfere in my freedom I was left with no other choice but to voluntarily resign my position; alternatively, they wanted me to resign. How can I compromise my freedom - just because they pay my salary and ensure my livelihood?"

"How can you suggest they were interfering in your freedom? An educational institution can't treat teachers the way a business enterprise treats its workers. A school is engaged in producing future citizens. By their exemplary nature, teachers are expected to engage their students - imparting them education and other moral values - even outside their classrooms. So, how can you complain that the management was interfering in your freedom?"

"I am not denying teachers ought to serve as role models, " Suguna countered. "In fact I would go further and say the very purpose of human life demands that every citizen has an obligation to live and set an example for the citizen of the next generation. Are you suggesting exemplary life should be limited to teachers only? Should a person choose an exemplary life just because he is a salaried employee?"

It was not just the sparkle in her eyes – even her speech and thoughts reminded Muthuvel of his boyhood friend Vaitha. He paused and stared at her – expecting her to go on. She felt she had spoken too much. Smiling, she said: “I have spoken too much.”

“Only a few deserve to speak on vital issues, and they ought to speak more,” Muthuvel grumbled to himself, and tried to put the applicant at ease. “That was no offense, you have only answered my question.”

“So you are suggesting a teacher is not subject to the rules applicable to other citizens,” Muthuvel said, and continued. “But I guess, you do agree a teacher must be governed by moral constraints - like everybody else?” He asked the question with no ulterior motive but Suguna seemed offended by it.

“Yes. I am a lawful citizen. I never participated in anti-social activities. Had I wanted I could have simply refused to resign my position as demanded and successfully resolved my problem with the courts. They too never filed any charges against me. In other words, at some of the schools I worked, people simply hated my guts. It is possible within this short time of our meeting here you too might have misunderstood me. In a culture where lies are spread all the time I am often perceived as arrogant because I believe in plain-speaking. I have seen people interfering in my personal affairs and spreading gossip; I refused to give in to their demands and they insisted I resign

my position. There were other incidents where I was falsely accused of vicious things and the circumstances demanded I resign my job. My accusers were the ones who lectured to me on morality and family values.” She paused, and as if suddenly overcome by emotion, bowed her head down and clasped her hands together. With her head still down, she let out a dry laughter saying, “At one of the schools they even insisted that I should get married if I wanted to keep my job in that school. Can you believe *that?*” As she gazed at him and smiled, Muthuvel couldn’t help admiring her while thinking, “How does she know I am on her side?” Still, he betrayed no emotion and tried to probe her further.

“As a teacher how can you fault the management of an institution when it addresses the moral conduct of an individual?”

She answered him:

“As far as I am concerned, I have always acted according to my conscience. I am always prepared to justify my actions in public in a rational manner. There are those who are slaves to certain ideology and therefore adamantly refuse to see others’ point of view. They are always ready to condemn and punish others.”

“Well, I think I will have lot of opportunity to discuss these issues with you in the future,” Muthuvel said, with a smile. His comment confirmed to Suguna that her application to the position has been accepted.

*During these three years since she accepted the teacher's position, I met with Suguna only four times in the first year. While it is true that each of these sessions mainly involved long conversations, they never developed into a close, intimate relationship between us; yet, they became – as I soon realized and Suguna too agreed with me in later years – the most unforgettable encounters of my life. Our second meeting since she first came to my office for the job interview took place after an interval of three months. But we continued our conversation as if we were in an ongoing exchange of ideas interrupted in the interim when one of us stepped out to attend a temporary business. I discussed with her the issues related to society, tradition and public morality.*

*Suguna lectured to me – quoting directly from Bertrand Russel's 'Marriage and Morals' - with hardly any notes or references. She argued marriage in the modern society could only mean a sexual companionship. "Marriage, families, property rights, and the morality that governs all the institutions, under the standards conceived and enforced in the modern society, are founded on the principle of ownership," she said. "In a marriage, the primary factor that sustains it is the sexual aspect and true human feelings take a second place; as such the man looks at his wife only as an instrument for the propagation of his heirs; I understand I am an independent human being; if it becomes absolutely essential that I must compromise my*

*freedom to produce an offspring and feel duly rewarded, I would only say that I am interested in an even more valuable reward - the preservation of my own freedom. It is not that I don't feel a need for the support and protection of a man; whatever I offer in return for such a commitment could only be called prostitution. Just as Bernard Shaw pointed out the modern-day marriage has become what he termed 'licensed prostitution'." Listening to her emotional discourse, I felt like jumping from my chair and exclaiming, like **Bharathiyar**, "Behold the words of this goddess, the very incarnation of womanhood!"*

*Initially, I remained just a listener. It was Suguna who did all the talking. I realized that those who articulate independent opinions and themes in general contradiction to the mainstream feel blissfully delighted when they are given a free rein -and this is important, - when someone is willing to listen to them. That was the main reason we were always craving for our next session when we found ourselves at the end of the last one and the beginning of the next. This craving – born out of an intellectual bent – should not be confused with the ardent desire of teen-age lovers drawn to one another by pure physical attraction. Still, owing to our ages and experience, we could curb our natural instincts. During those four encounters in the first year I kept to myself all my personal opinions and thoughts about Suguna. It is quite possible I suddenly became tight-mouthed and could say nothing – because as a man totally deprived of a woman's companionship over all these years – I*

*suddenly tumbled upon someone – intelligent and articulate – voicing her position from a high ground.*

*A year after our first meeting I was invited, along with some of Suguna's close friends, to a birthday party at her home. As my birthday gift I presented to her a book by D.H. Lawrence – a collection of his essays. I penned the following words as my compliment to Suguna: "To an independent spirit – a representative of the intellectual world."*

*How fond are those memories! Such were my thoughts when we were together, and again, when I had to part her company and spent my days alone, in my room upstairs, disheartened over my life trapped in the contradictions between my intellect and daily boredom.*

The next meeting between Muthuvel and Suguna during the second year occurred under very interesting circumstances:

A male student of Suguna's happened to write a love letter to one of his classmates. "My beloved," the letter began. "I am in love with you, I am pining for you. Are you in love with me? If so, reply to me – in one sentence." The girl in question showed the letter to her parents expressing her horror how a young man dare ask her such a question – and thus established the purity of her heart. The girl's father apparently got mad, stroked his mustache in a threatening gesture and intimidated the headmaster. The headmaster ordered both the stu-

dents to his office to conduct an enquiry at which the class teacher also was present. When the headmaster, stern and angry, declared he would uphold the dignity and the morals of his co-educational institution by dismissing the student for writing the offensive love letter, Suguna intervened. Before expressing her opinion, she requested that the students be asked to leave the room and wait outside. Then she addressed the headmaster, and spoke:

“Sir, excuse me, but I see no reason why the student and her parents are upset – I am afraid they are blowing this out of proportion. And I don’t think your action to fire the student from the school for writing the letter is proper.”

The headmaster resented Suguna’s attitude. He was out for revenge – for the simple reason that she seemed to be supporting the student charged with writing the letter.

“I am not going to tolerate this kind of rowdy behavior in this school – as long as I am in charge,” he declared and pounded hard on the table.

“Where is the rowdiness here?” Suguna asked, exuding patience and calmness. “I too have read that letter. What I see is only a kind of childish behavior on the part of the student. That’s all!”

The headmaster felt an uncontrollable rage toward Suguna. He was amazed how a woman could utter those words. “Seems to me you would like to teach this boy how to pen a love letter,” he said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.



“Sir, we shouldn’t get emotional over this – just like the girl’s parents have,” Suguna countered. “We must try to sort out the teenagers’ minds – things that are unavoidable when children are in an awkward age passing through adolescence. What we have here is a kind of a puppy love. Were this young man attracted to the girl at a proper stage of his life, he would have treated the matter as a sacred obligation and expressed his love for her in a discreet manner. Why should we punish this young man and thereby hurt his male ego?” All her arguments made no sense to the headmaster. He had promised the girl’s father – when he filed the complaint – that in no time he would get rid of the student for writing the alleged letter; now he was very angry that Suguna stood in the way.

It also happened that the girl’s father was a prominent member of the local community, held the title of school correspondent, and was personally known to Muthuvel. The headmaster was concerned that in the absence of any action against the accused student, the girl’s father might directly take the matter to Muthuvel – thus endangering the headmaster’s career. At the same time he lacked the courage and conviction to ignore Suguna’s opinion in the matter. How could he enforce his ruling without the concerned teacher supporting his action?

“She is just an upstart – how dare she act so arrogant?” the headmaster asked himself. “She is haughty and could easily corrupt the students and the staff. The first priority is – she has to go!” An-

gry and determined, he met with Muthuvel and lodged a complaint against Suguna – in writing.

*The headmaster's complaint became a pretext to question Suguna when I opened my heart to her to reveal my mental anguish. I began my questioning in a thoroughly professional manner to probe her mind; then I handed her the headmaster's written complaint and asked her, "How do you respond to this?"*

*I remember she didn't sit facing me. Brave and smiling, she spoke up:*

*"When I voiced my opposition to the student's dismissal, I didn't think I was being arrogant. I feel the same way now. The headmaster never questioned the merits of my arguments when I expressed them as a responsible teacher, and I didn't expect he would later submit charges against me to the school management. What the student did was no horrible or unspeakable crime; my pleas in his support are based on two simple facts – he is good in his studies and he comes from a poor family. This is what I have to say about this inquiry: I am willing to plead the student's case before the school management and you may decide further course of action after such an inquiry is completed. If the school management chooses to condone the headmaster's arbitrary move to dismiss the student, I would condemn such an action and submit my resignation."*

*"That's something you are good at," I mum-*

*bled to myself and tried to calm her, "Why should you get upset when justice is on your side?" I gestured her to take a seat.*

*"I am here to answer the charges against me. I stand here not as your friend to exchange ideas. I am no stranger to these charges against me. I have been accused of arrogance, haughtiness, and promoting immoral behavior. What else do I need?" A bitter smile played on her face as she returned the headmaster's written complaint to me. I could understand how deeply she was hurt by the proceedings. I immediately cast aside my mask and said: "Miss Suguna, I am sorry. Please forgive me if my questioning hurt your feelings. Since our first meeting I have been conducting myself as your friend only. In whatever capacity or position I was acting or questioning you, didn't you notice a soul that was trying to understand you as a whole person? Please sit down!"*

*Her eyes turned moist. Maybe she never imagined she would sense a warm heart tempered by a mature mind – belying my outward appearance and demeanor.*

*She sat down as if in a trance obeying my command. Her continued silence, quivering lips and sparkling eyes signaled to me that she fully understood me. Still, I continued my cross examination:*

*"How can you defend that student's action?" I asked. "Granted he was good in studies and comes from a poor family, don't you think it was improper for him to pen such a letter to his class-*

mate?" Suguna replied calmly – without getting emotional or angry as she did earlier.

"I don't think so. What did he say in the letter, anyway? 'I am in love with you; if you are in love with me, please let me have your response in one sentence.' What's the big deal? He was not forcing her to admit anything, neither did he seem expecting her consent. He openly expressed his own feelings toward her, don't you agree? If the girl was averse to such sentiments she could have simply ignored his letter. I see her in an awkward situation – actually caught between two minds – her heart warming up to the fact that the young man dared ask her such a question, but she was too cowardly to openly acknowledge such a compliment; on the other hand, she could not resist making everybody know that the young man expressed a desire for her. That was the reason why she made the contents of the letter public – thus discreetly acknowledging the sentiments expressed in the letter. These are the problems of adolescence not easily discerned by parents. It is the teachers who socialize with these students, understand their feelings, who can steer them in the right direction. Even now I don't see anything wrong in a young man asking a girl, 'I am in love with you; do you love me?' "

"Then, are you suggesting any man can address any woman with such a question? Would that be an appropriate behavior?"

"No, I am not suggesting any man can address any woman with such a question. That would be

*totally lacking in manners and becomes an uncultured behavior. Even so, you must understand such a behavior doesn't violate the normal standards of decency or propriety. Don't you see – here the primary focus is on the feelings of the person to whom the question is addressed. So, under the circumstances, such a question may be considered appropriate.”*

*I was longing for such a question for many days – but it lurked deep within me due to some vague reasons and my cowardice. Now that Suguna pronounced such a question was appropriate, my yearning was free from restraint and burst out of my heart. Even after several attempts, at this distance of time, I am unable to recall the exact words that framed my question.*

*All those days I was keenly conscious of Suguna as a mature person and a deep thinker. Now, for the first time I realized she was also a bundle of emotions, a personification of womanhood.*

*She responded on cue, as if she had anticipated my question a long time ago and was feeling restless for not responding to an unasked question. Then . . . Good heavens, I can't go any further! Words simply fail me! There is no way I can describe that scene!*

As he penned these words Muthuvel becomes emotional, his eyes sparkle with a youthful vigor and he feels nostalgic about his old romantic days.

It was the farthest corner of the town – near the railroad station – where the road takes a wide turn. Suguna stands there, her eyes locked on the road. She carries a small suitcase in one hand. A silk scarf – folded into a triangle – covers her ears and chin. She wears dark glasses as if to hide her identity.

Like a passenger in a hurry awaiting a bus she checks her watch and casts her eyes away on the road when a large, open car comes riding fast, stops near her and whisks her away in no time.

Suguna, seated snugly, next to Muthuvel in the car, leans her head against his shoulder.

Muthuvel was quite thrilled at this sudden romantic turn in his latter years. He could never imagine such happiness in human life. All the books he had read gave him no insight into human condition. Now he understood that a single experience could impart knowledge where hundred books failed. After Suguna insinuated herself into Muthuvel's life she also brought him passion.

*Why does clandestine love – cultivated in secrecy, indulged in covert encounters, lived and nourished in a personal, private paradise, lend such an aura and appeal?*

*When human beings – men and women – lead their lives like aboriginals driven by natural instincts; when they cast aside their clothes and conventional notions of morality and follow the free*

*spirit of birds, animals, cave men, monsters and gods - totally uninhibited and naked – and indulge in love making as depicted in the ancient temple sculptures and frescos- can one call such existence a liberation – transcending the physical, mental and the spiritual?*

*How does one find joy and meaning in these weird actions?*

*We feasted on love; no cranny of heart or body remained unsatisfied . . .*

*I became a hostage to another kind of cult – the cult of salvation through love and sex . . .*

*Invariably our weekends were spent in a lonely estate bungalow surrounded by a forest, a creek and craggy mountains. Most of the servants in the bungalow belonged to some local tribe, so they thought Suguna – accompanying me – as my lawful wife.*

*Those were the most meaningful days of my life. Those weekends helped us forge our love – merging our bodies, feelings and intellect.*

*Behold that bungalow . . .*

It is a square building surrounded by a fence and passageway on all the four sides. It is an ancient structure lacking in proper maintenance and upkeep for a long time. Only recently the massive banyan trees hovering over the barriers and shooting up through the walls were attended to and trimmed – so were the huge green patches of moss left on the walls exposed to incessant rain. One can

watch from its veranda the forest stretching far away into view. Days echoed with murmurs from bees and moths; at night you can hear the jackals prowling – often their howls becoming indistinguishable from those of the tribes in some festive mood. Blaring drumbeats often intruded into the silent nights.

The building sat atop a small mountain; at its foot ran a stream overflowing and dashing against the craggy rocks and extending over a mile surrounding the mountain in a semi-circle before plunging down a valley as a waterfall.

Muthuvel and Suguna spent most of their days in various pursuits in and around the valley; they would be seated on either side of a rock absorbed in a book; or they would be sitting close to one another, engaged in a conversation, with their feet dangling in the water below; or they would be holding their hands together and taking a mile-long walk along the rocky terrain. Their entire world centered on the valley.

They saw themselves as two representatives of humanity granted the privilege to savor life in all its glory and fullness. They enjoyed every minute of their company with one another – totally forgetful of their separate existence.

*Following the week when I had invited Suguna to my office to investigate the complaint from the school headmaster and for the two subsequent years, Suguna and I spent our weekends – and even some weekdays – in my estate. Like a student*



*of my good old days when I eagerly looked forward to each Friday and the weekends, now I approached each weekday and weekends. I felt twenty years younger in those two years. If one leads an ideal life, the longer the life span, the less one ages!*

*Till recently Suguna and I had never tried to probe our backgrounds. We were not interested in dissecting the allegations hurled at either of us. It is true that in our long, deep conversations as we discussed so many important subjects, we did talk about our personal lives. But on any particular topic our conversation centered on such personal experiences that would help us understand better the matter under discussion. It is possible that at some point in our conversation I might mention my wives; that would happen strictly at my intent, and I may suddenly feel a loss of words. Similarly when Suguna recalled some past event or someone romantically involved with her, I would show no particular interest. I believe there are no secrets from my past – that are unknown to Suguna, and I also think there are none from her past that are unknown to me. Our relationship – between a man and a woman – is based on mutual respect, and we have never violated that cardinal principle. We have naturally embraced those qualities – so essential for a happily married couple.*

*It was with such a feeling of satisfaction and clarity over our relationships that one day I asked Suguna: “We seem to be so compatible with one another. Don’t’ you think if we were married to*

*one another we would make an ideal couple?"*

*She responded – first with a laugh. I immediately sensed her mind. Sensing my fondness for her was clouding my thinking, she remained gracious, and spoke:*

*"These are not your words; do you see what I mean?" she began and continued, as if lecturing a student. "You are essentially demanding social acceptance for our relationship; do you think the word 'marriage' would confer a new meaning to it? What marriage means to an individual is different from what it implies to the society at large. We consider ourselves as free individuals, yet we are a part of the society and thus possess a 'social conscience'. The word 'society' is an abstraction, we can't pinpoint what it is. But it has been in existence for thousands of years without the institutional constraints of marriage, and it will continue to survive for many more years. We humans seem to embody within us –against our grain – all the ancestral characteristics. It is because we both feel happy in our relationship, your ego – the male ego – wants to possess me – as an exclusive property – and exercise control over me. This desire – your will to dominate – has nothing whatsoever to do with the values you cherish as an individual. The very question of social acceptance has origin in man's weakness. Do you know what makes a man most vulnerable? It is his quest for permanent happiness – an euphemism for transcendence – that he shamelessly seeks. Such a quest leads to his permanent loss of peace and mind. Even while enjoy-*

*ing what is within his reach, man is keenly aware that he might lose that privilege. So he becomes a plaything of fate – desperate for something he badly wants and worrying about losing what he already has. The world and life are permanent, but because they are lived in and shaped by insecure individuals, we hear all these phrases – ‘The world is an illusion’, ‘Life is a fiction’, and so on. but that affirmation destroys the spirit of friendship in a marriage. This morning when we took a walk along the stream on those craggy rocks – you may recall how firmly we were holding our hands together; occasionally, we let our hands free when I found myself way behind you and thus didn’t want to cause your fall by pulling you toward me. Later, we once again held our hands in a grip and continued our walk. What helps us in our lives is this voluntary action, a covenant made by ourselves: we had our hands under a firm grip, but our hands were not bound together. When an external force or compulsion makes a covenant – either against our will or with our consent –under some pretext or the other – our hands will be held in a tighter grip – with no room for free, spontaneous, unbidden response. Such a life – lacking in fervor and free spirit – is a prison! I take the liberty of clarifying this point because you brought up this issue of marriage. At this minute, I think of nobody except you. That doesn’t mean all the minutes would be or should be lived in the same fashion. This is the truth at this moment – to the extent I believe this is something no other pure or chaste woman could ever claim in her life sharing with*

*another man. This is a fact and not a boast. It is possible someday we might part company. These events –meeting, parting and occasional encounters in human life – are merely voluntary acts. One shouldn't shed tears over them.*

*I find this idea totally anathema to the men I come across in my day-to-day life; typically, a man goes crazy at the very thought of my independence! Why should he suffer so much mental anguish? If he were to act so pathetic, what more can he expect from a woman, anyway? Where is the happiness if he is so possessive and acts as if he is under some trance? Why should I be responsible for another's suffering? As far as I am concerned, I don't want any other person to suffer for my sake – and I am also not willing to suffer for somebody else. A relationship should never be reduced to a state of mutual pain and suffering; fortunately, the society is undergoing changes and we are witnessing welcome signs: today an individual, if necessary, is able to free himself from the marital ties and smell freedom. I do believe in the principle, 'One man, one woman' – if it comes only with no strings attached. I am not saying this because I am promiscuous or want multiple partners. There were occasions when those who failed to force me into a relationship against my will had to part my company - that was certainly no occasion for sadness. The most tragic situation imaginable in life would be when a relationship becomes totally indissoluble." Suguna enlightened me with her philosophical outlook on several occasions.*

*While it is true that Suguna and I had to give up totally our notions of individuality for our mutual happiness we were careful to preserve them within certain limits we had imposed on ourselves. Even if I had wanted Suguna to change some of her views I would have never demanded her to do so.*

*It saddened me that we – two brave, independent souls – were acting like cowards in our secret, weekly rendezvous. Every Friday evening I would pick up Suguna from the railroad station in a stealthy move away from any prying eyes – we could literally hear our heartbeats as we nervously hurried to my place; again, on Monday mornings, before dawn, when I dropped her back at the railroad station and watched her from afar hiring a cab to take her home I would feel overcome by shame at my timidity.*

*What am I afraid of?*

*We rob every woman of her freedom – by putting her on a pedestal and rewarding her with titles like ‘Goddess’ and ‘Symbol of Chastity’. The woman lives under constant threat that these rewards might be snatched away from her at any time. How is her fear different from mine? I too have received ample rewards from this society!*

*One early morning, my car, after commencing its journey from my estate, rode past the railroad station and entered the village. We continued to see one another within the village itself – causing a panic among the community - as if a plague has descended on it!*

*Good heavens! Why are these folks always gossiping about us? I keep wondering – what were they doing before we ever showed up in the village? Are these village sites – the local temple, park, and shopping centers, built for spreading gossip?*

*The more they gossiped the braver I became. If the entire village – which in the past had treated me with love and respect – had now turned bitter and hostile toward me, need I say more about my two wives? Our household was reduced to chaos as my two wives now found a pretext: not only did they engage in bickering with one another – they tried to settle their score with me as well. Of course, I could care less. Whenever they confronted me I would 'turn off' my internal switch. From their violent hand gestures, grotesque facial expressions and frothing mouths, I knew how vulgar and obscene their thoughts and accusations against me were: they think I have been seduced by a woman who is after my wealth. However, the truth is both my wives are competing with one another to lay claim on my property – eagerly awaiting who among them will inherit it after my death. Now they are scared they will be cheated out of the deal – and some wayward woman will get the prize.*

*My servants mocked me behind my back; my close friends aimed barbs right in my face – nursing a perverse pleasure they had hurt me.*

*“How can you do something like this – you are past fifty!” asked my daughter whose husband in*

*his thirties has already aged into golden years.*

*It was only Sardar, my pet, who acted as if my personal life was none of his business. How civilized and decent he is! He stood close by, his eyes extending sympathy to me when I faced verbal assaults from others. Sardar would often jump around and play with me as if compensating for others' ill treatment.*

*I wanted to rescue my family members from any sense of insecurity following my departure; so, one day I informed Suguna I decided to hand over all my assets to my folks so that we may start a new life in a new community of strangers. Suguna was prepared for any adventure.*

*For the last one week my house has been plunged into intense activities – with lawyers, accountants, and their aides poring over files and legal documents . . .*

*As I was slowly giving up one obligation after another, I felt both mentally and physically relaxed. One day I invited all the family members to assemble in the main hall where I read out the details of my property settlement - inviting varied responses from the audience – catcalls, boos, and curses.*

*Since I had inherited the property from my ancestors its value had increased ten-fold under my care. It was my hard work and dedication that brought this growth, and but for my active role the family business would have never diversified into other areas such as bus services, textile mills or*

*the movie theaters. I am no more indispensable to this family – or to these business establishments. My own experience is a testimony to the truth that a business can certainly thrive without its founder.*

*I was not claiming any of these assets for myself. As I finished the task of parceling out these assets to my family members at my own discretion and judgment I even toyed with the idea of adding a clause in the settlement: I wanted to stipulate that the family members, owners of these assets, would be barred from reselling these assets in any form. I could understand –even now – how such a feudal mindset came into play. But I refused to add such a clause – because it would violate their fundamental right to property.*

*I took out a sum of two hundred thousand rupees as my salary.*

The night is drawing to an end – soon it will set in motion all the activities about to unfold in daytime.

Muthuvel is set to leave soon. For the last one hour he has been playing with his Sardar.

He noticed the servants' eyes turn moist while they walked past him carrying his suitcases, leather bag and other belongings from his room upstairs to the car. For a moment, Muthuvel thought he must instruct them to take a good care of Sardar after he was gone; but he refrained from doing any such thing. "Why this unnecessary exer-



cise of power?" he asked himself.

Around thirty minutes past seven, Muthuvel came down the stairs looking like a thirty year old man, dressed in white clothes and a simple shawl covering them. Once again, he cast his eyes on the library.

Once the summer vacation was over, his library too would become part of a local college. "How many Vaithas will it produce?" The very thought overwhelmed him with joy.

His erstwhile family members were now assembled in the hall. They seemed calm and quiet, as if they had transformed themselves into new persons. Neither Bhagyam nor Dakshayani was crying or in a fighting mood – much to Muthuvel's astonishment. When he stared at Bhagyam she coughed and seemed resigned to the inevitable as she uttered a prayer. "She is saying something auspicious," thought Muthuvel, "She may change into a different person the very next moment." He averted his look away from her.

He felt a little embarrassed. He was a little sad as to how he should take leave of his family members. He felt even sadder when he thought they all had misunderstood him. He had nothing against them – no ill feeling, no animosity and no grudge; none of them was going to miss him, anyway. He wanted to make that clear to them.

But he remained silent because they would never understand him no matter what he said. As his eyes fell on one of the grandchildren, he re-

called his own grandfather who had gone away to Benaras in his golden years.

It has been a long time since he had set his foot on all the rooms of that big house. Now he is leaving his abode, once for all. His hands fondly touched Sardar's head while he murmured a few words . . .

His driver approached Muthuvel politely and handed him an envelope. Muthuvel suddenly realized the silence that had prevailed in the hall thus far had been suddenly replaced by a hushed excitement among his family members. Silently, he took out his eyeglasses from his shirt pocket, ripped open the envelope and read the contents of a letter. The letter was written in English.

"My dear friend," the letter began. Muthuvel was scared to read further. Hesitant and fearful, he slowly continued reading:

Please forgive me. Human weakness lies essentially in seeking a permanent state. I am sorry I have betrayed your trust in me at this critical moment. I have already made myself clear to you: because I don't want to suffer for the sake of others, I will never allow others suffering for my sake. Only last evening, for the first time, I pondered over this paradox: I am hardly in a position to guarantee permanence to others, or to myself, yet I was willing to go with your proposition by which you would be severing all your existing ties and relationships. It was only after your two wives, son and daughter personally met with me and ex-

plained the situation that I understood the full import of our action. Whatever may have been my answer to their question that would only compromise our freedoms. It is not just our marriage that limits our freedom; even if we find ourselves locked away in a private world with just two of us, we may find the situation eventually turning into a burden. We should never let our relationship become a burden, now or in the future. What I am trying to convey through this letter is this: we don't have to go away from here. Wherever we go, we would be living in a society where a small elite dictates the mores of that society. I hope you agree with me. Because I didn't want to disappoint you after your visit, I chose to make this suggestion through a messenger.

*Yours, Suguna*

Muthuvel felt as if he had suddenly aged twenty years.

'Are all the women victims – sacrificed at the altar of the society?

Bhagyam and Dakshayani stood at one end, Suguna at the other. They have only one thing in common – they are all victims. It is because of her victimization that Suguna is desperately trying to safeguard her freedom. In doing so, hasn't she actually narrowed her own vision, and her future? Is she – by her action – seeking revenge on this society, just like the other ordinary, simple, women seeking revenge on their husbands?

Suguna is accusing me of trying to escape my social responsibilities. How absurd! Indeed it is she who is trying to escape from the social taboos.

What is going on here? My second life has ended even before it has begun! What can I do now?

Now I am the poorest member of this family. I am no more the owner of this house. My foolish son-in-law, standing before me, is far richer than I am. I have been quite gracious to these family members- are they justified in subjecting me to this shabby treatment? What a devious plot! How cleverly have they manipulated her to succeed in their conspiracy!

They are glowing with success – look at their faces! My god!

What if I try to talk Suguna out of this? No way, that would be the most disgraceful thing to do! What more can I explain to her, anyway? Anything I might suggest against her decision would be infringing upon her freedom!

*‘Life is a procession – where people, on their paths, meet with one another. Sometimes they walk together in company, and after a while, they go their own way. These events –meeting, parting, and occasional encounters – are voluntary acts! One shouldn’t shed tears over them!’*

I remember those were the words Suguna spoke the other day . . . ’

Muthuvel silently climbed the stairs leading to his private room – resting for a moment on every one of the stairs, his head bowed down, and the body fully tired. Sardar followed his master all the way – his chain from the neck dragged along the stairs just like Muthuvel’s soul was.

As soon as he reached his room upstairs, Muthuvel slammed the door shut before Sardar could follow him.

He picked up from among the pile of books and papers strewn on the table the sheets he had scribbled the previous night and meticulously tucked away in a folder called ‘My Story.’

A gentle smile played on his face.

Bhagyam’s voice was heard from downstairs.

“She probably thought she would inherit the property . . .” The rest was inaudible to Muthuvel.

“Humiliation! Is your name woman?”

As he mumbled those words, Muthuvel’s eyes suddenly fell on the bottle of sleeping pills.

He raced to the table, opened the file and wrote down the following words on the last page of his diary:

*“Now I am now going to rest.”*

Outside, Sardar was struggling to get to his master - scraping the door with his paws. Muthuvel felt someone was whispering into his ears from another world.

The bottle of sleeping pills lying next to him on  
the bed is now empty!

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Note:

Original title: *Samoogam Enbadu Nalu Per* (1967)



# THE DOMINION

## 1

He lay on his back in a bed spread in front of her photograph. A lamp glowed between him and the photo. The only sounds in that quiet night came from a clock on the wall, which read quarter after one. Even as his eyes were riveted on that photograph his lips quivered with a smile and recalled the most intimate terms of endearment he had shared with her . . .

She is now only an object etched in his memory; since the last fifteen days that photo is all that remains of her.

As he lapsed into slumber grieving over her loss he felt her fondly nearing him and touching his shoulder, her whispers into his ears growing hot and inviting. "Why are you sleeping like a baby?" She teased him. "Please get up and drink the milk."

He ignored her and rolled over on the bed away from her. She broke into a giggle and as she slid her hand under his head and slowly lifted him with his back resting on her chest he felt the chimes of her bangles ringing in his ears. The smell of the jasmine flowers



filled the air and he opened his eyes.

He felt the milk cup being pressed to his lips. He was still half-asleep and so felt the milk trickling down his throat, and swallowed a little mouthful.

“I have had enough! I feel I am already taking care of a baby,” she sighed and complained. “Once a baby comes along the father and the baby will be draining the life out of me!” She caressed the locks flowing down his forehead, helped him to sit erect on the bed and handed over the cup to him. “Please hold on to it,” she pleaded with him. “I have got to go and clean up the kitchen.”

“You have to go . . . You are gone – for ever,” he moaned. “Are you not dead? Have you returned from your grave?” The question, begun in elation, soon evaporated into a parched memory. “How is that possible?” he asked himself. “I have cremated you with my own hands.” His distant memories seemed lost in an arid desert . . .

The clock struck two. His sleep fully broken, he opened his eyes. He was shocked a little realizing he was still on the bed. The light was on, and the clock was ticking. He felt her smiling at him. He remembered he took that photograph when she was smiling.

‘How come those lips are slowly moving? I see her smiling . . .’

He sat erect on the bed.

He heard a chuckle from a room corner and

turned around.

He was sweating. He could listen his heart beating – in rhyme with the clock.

When he looked back at the photograph, he saw the smile on her face, but now he was scared.

It is late at night and he is lonely in his house; and someone is stalking him at this hour. Fear gripping him, he got up from the bed.

“Pattu! Do you know how lovely you look when you smile?” he had complimented her many a time. But what does it mean when she is gone and he is now left with only her photo smiling at him?

He could recall everything, every moment from his memory. .

The smell of her jasmine flowers . . .

The chimes from her bangles . . .

Her silk sari zipping across from her gentle walk . . .

“How many times have I savored those little, precious moments . . .

You are now gone, for ever! My intellect tells me you are no more. Yet, you are always in my thoughts – you have dominion over my feelings. I am haunted by pain, fear and horror turning this into a hellish night.”

He felt she was in the room trying to open her dresser. He sharpened his ears as he felt she was

playing with a keybunch.

‘It is true, she is right here, I hear the sound.’

‘That is a bald lie. . . She is dead; you are the only one in the house. There is no other soul here,’ his intellect tells him.

“But how am I able to listen to all these sounds? The chimes of the bangles, the opening of the dresser. . . . I feel too the smell of jasmine flowers . . .”

He could no more deal with the terror of his loneliness. His body and mind shaken, he found it impossible to lie on the bed.

How many nights had he spent on that bed sharing her intimacy!

He felt his voice choke up. Beads of sweat collected all over his face.

He jumped out of the bed and opened the door.

First there was darkness all around. Then he switched on the light.

There stood the dresser.

He could see all her clothes – new and used saris and blouses – hanging from a rope strung across the room.

The key ring was still hanging from the dresser door, just as it was there the last time his wife opened it . . .

As he keenly examined each and every sari hanging from the rope, he could recall vividly each

and every occasion when she had worn that sari and stood before him. Like a shadow play those images from the past now flashed before him . . .

As he realized that his sweetheart – who was his better half sharing his mind, thoughts and dreams – was gone forever, he found himself living like a walking corpse.

He was overwhelmed with grief.

He gathered all the saris hanging from the rope and held them close to his face. His shoulders sagged a little . . .

Suddenly he felt someone caressing him from behind. He turned around, his eyes still moist. He thought for a moment and again held the saris closer to his nose as if smelling them.

“She is no more,” he told himself. “But her memory has taken a hold on me, just like her smell resides in these saris.”

Yes; she had a smell of her own, he was the only one who knew it.

The time was three.

He was scared to think of his future. When he thought of his pathetic condition –for the last two weeks he had been acting like a mad man lost in sleepless nights – he was overcome with self-pity.

Now his attention was drawn to his bed where he felt someone was rolling on it; he also heard someone chuckle.

He felt unable to breathe. Her memories per-

vading each and every corner of the house seemed to oppress him.

Slowly, he moved away and opened the room windows. Afar he could see the stars in the dark sky as well as the moon- who seemed cursed into loneliness. The cool breeze from the windows chilled his sweating drops. He stood there for a long time staring at the sky.

The house seemed to be reverberating to the surroundings – in response to the smell from jasmine flowers, chimes from bangles, the zipping of a silk sari and chuckles from her.

He was frozen – physically as well as emotionally. He was scared even to turn around.

In the early hours of the morning when the milkmen began driving their cows and a rooster afar heralded the daybreak, he felt a little better. He slowly walked back to his bed. He was able to snatch a few hours of sleep till the sun's rays through the window would warm up his face.

Daytime, he was freed from loneliness and engaged himself in the daily routine.

But he dreaded the approaching night; even its memory tyrannized him.

“Is this how my life going to end?” he asked himself. “Am I at the mercy of hellish nights? I am even ashamed to admit – in daytime – that I feel terrified at nights! How long can I bear this agony – without even sharing my fear with another soul?”

She is persecuting me with her dominion over

me; how I wish she would rather take me to her abode – the void where I can have permanent peace of mind.”

## 2

After a few days, one night, he was sitting on his bed.

Her photograph stood in front of the bed. A lamp was glowing in the middle. He is seriously buried in some thought as he looks at that photo.

Now he doesn't experience her smile as a trance or as a spell. He believes that smile itself would offer him strength and comfort . . .

He does feel aroused by the chimes of the bangles; the smell from jasmines floating through the air caresses his heart . . .

But he is not scared of them.

Why? Because they are not just a figment of his imagination, they are real!

How can that be? She has been dead less than a month ago, and now he has another wife? My god, what kind of man is he?

That is how the world talks about him. He has heard everything.

“Pattu, damn this world! This is my problem, and so it also concerns you!

It belongs to the realm of perception and has nothing to do with any worldly matters!

I keep laughing when I listen to these folks . .

They are saying I have no love for you, that I was just waiting for you to die and then got into a second marriage. Pattu, they are saying I have no heart!

Pattu, let me say this, right away. If what they are saying is true – that is, if I had no love for you, if I had felt no warmth for you in my heart, this second marriage would have never taken place!

I could sense your power and dominion over my heart and feelings only after you were dethroned from that high pedestal. Now there are certain things in the world that must be held under dominion – otherwise, they become meaningless. That is how I felt under your dominion for ten years – and got accustomed to a happy and wonderful life! Now, when I feel orphaned following your loss I hear these same people – who hardly know me – lecturing that I must renounce this life and become a monk!

It is easy for the ruler to give up his dominion; on the other hand, his subject has no such choice.

I had experienced love and intimacy with my mother. If that never happened, I would have longed in my childhood for a step-mother.

The world understands the word ‘wife’ in rather crude and simplistic terms. I too fell under the same trap. If a relationship that begins with physical intimacy doesn’t extend beyond that stage, it degenerates just into prostitution. Now, philosophers have called the human body an abode for the human soul. In general, many men and women

have found bliss only in flesh – but they seem to forget that it is their sensual gratification that serves as a shield against their willful and capricious ways. You gave me something I could never ask from my mother. You also gave me something that no mother could ever give. Can we say all those pleasures are just a trance? A dream, a spell?

No, they are real. They are real feelings, memories truly treasured. Now you are gone beyond my senses, but your dominion continues even with more force and intensity. I feel trapped in your siege and my pain and agony seem to grow stronger than ever!

If a child, bereft of its mother, longs for a stepmother, can it be accused of crime?

Don't you think that a woman, who was denied the joys of motherhood, would cheerfully acknowledge the efforts of a stepmother and warmly bless her? Pattu, tell me, where is competition here?

Again, we took no vows or made no commitments to one another – as we normally see in stories and movies – that we wouldn't take another spouse or love another person. We were never that crazy. Again, if after your death, I could bring myself to sleep on the same bed with peace of mind, will it not render all those memorable nights I had spent with you meaningless? If I could easily renounce all the pleasures you had given me over the years, will it not mean they are not worth a dime, in the first place? That would completely negate



your dominion over me! It is only now – in your absence – I have come to see all those nights I had spent in your company and the most intimate memories we shared together as precious moments in heaven! That you could make me realize such a truth in your very absence only lends even more meaning and force to your dominion over me!

I suffered mental torture by memories of our happy, joyful life. I was also scared after you were gone. Many a night, I acted like a mad man – with no sleep. Is this how I should honor your memory?

Can I forget the woman who tickled my senses and aroused the strongest passions in me? That would be a horror! If I could bring myself to imagine that the woman who held me in the most passionate bond and transported me to new heights of heavenly bliss – with her very presence, smiles, and smell-could be reduced to a mere dream, I would only say I am betraying my soul! Pattu, tell me, can you call it anything else?

I am fully aware how you feel: this doesn't sit well with you . . .

We led our lives with no conscious feeling that you were the ruler and I was the subject. Now your problem has been solved. But, what about me? There is something else, I have become a problem to myself!

I found out it is no joy to be released from your dominion. I want to relive those moments, and once again I want to become your subject! So I married this woman. Why, because I am still in

love with you! Your command over me compelled me, and I have obeyed your order. Remember this, you had never given me a life that could be easily renounced – one of misery and unhappiness.

Pattu, you know me, I have a heart too!

This woman represents you! I was your subject, and now she rules me - on your behalf!

Damn this world! What we are talking about is something that brings two half-souls into union! This doesn't concern anybody else!"

He now heard the zipping of a silk sari, the chimes of bangles and the smell of jasmine flowers filling the air; his eyes are still closed.

There is a chuckle, followed by a mild, affectionate rebuke, "Why are you sitting on the bed, like a baby, half asleep?"

She nudges closer to him, caresses his shoulder and pleads, her whispers hot and inviting, "Please drink the milk!"

As the liquid touches his lips and trickles down his throat, he opens his eyes and looks at the photo before him. Comforted by its warmth and affection – like a mother watching her child – he feels the fear take leave of him.

Why fear when you have company?

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Note:

Original title: *Aaalugai* (1963)



## A BORDER-LINE CASE

**I**t has been almost ten days since Kannan decided he should visit his psychiatrist-friend with his wife Rajam. A little confused how he should gain his wife's consent to the visit he was literally spending all these days working out a strategy.

If Rajam was just a naïve and unworldly woman he could easily invent some pretext and ask her go along with him, but Rajam had some education and was certainly knowledgeable in these matters. If she were to get mad and ask him, "What do you think of me? Do you want to brand me crazy?" the situation could get out of hand. Kannan had read in books or heard from someone that the first sign of mental illness is the patient's unwillingness to see a doctor.

Ten days ago when he first thought of taking Rajam to a doctor with her consent he casually told her he knew a doctor whom he would like to visit - as a friend; he also mentioned, in the same breath, that the doctor was a specialist, a psychiatrist. Kannan keenly examined to see if this revelation registered any change on Rajam's face. There was no undue reaction from her and he let

the matter lie there, thinking to himself: 'Enough for today.'

But he did bring up that doctor's name in his subsequent conversations with her; he deliberately referred to that doctor and talked about him. He thought it was essential he mentally prepare Rajam for that eventual visit.

Rajam didn't seem to pay much attention to those talks. In fact she was not the type to pay serious attention to any of her husband's homilies. Occasionally Kannan would say something in a mood of excitement; such occasions were numerous when he tried to get her attention, promised her several things which went unfulfilled over the last five years and stayed etched in Rajam's memory. During the early years of their marriage Rajam had even cried, fought and argued with her husband over her hopes and dreams, but she got nowhere.

'That is how she is now responding to my suggestion' Kannan told himself. Maybe that was not a bad thing; still, he has been obsessed with Rajam for the last ten days.

He was confident her condition didn't warrant immediate consultation with the doctor. All she needed was some simple treatment and a few tranquilizer pills. Probably he himself might be able to treat Rajam – by engaging her in some plain-speaking. But Kannan felt it would be better to rely on a professional doctor's help. He observed the subtle changes in Rajam's moods and her be-

havioral patterns even more keenly than a psychiatrist would. He had read about them in books and now that he has observed those symptoms in his wife from close quarters he expanded his knowledge by secretly delving into more books and conducting some research. He concluded Rajam's problems were still in the very early stages of developing into mental illness.

He discovered that during the last ten days Rajam virtually had not slept on any single night. That was something he personally knew by remaining himself awake and observing her closely. What really startled him was the fact that whenever he inquired her Rajam told him a deliberate lie - that she had sound sleep.

He devised a method to determine if she was actually asleep or not. In the manner of waking a person in sound sleep—someone who wouldn't be normally aroused by a soft sound caused by the scratching of a glass tumbler or a finger casually brushing against the bed stand—he subjected her to his tests. And just as he had expected Rajam would suddenly rise from the bed and ask him: "Aren't you asleep yet?" He will ask her, in return, the same question. She would reply with a scowl on her face, "Why do you keep harassing someone in sound sleep with these silly questions?" and go back to sleep. Kannan carried out this experiment invariably every night and duly recorded his findings—in memory.

He concluded her mind rankled with some deep-seated anxiety. Maybe her mind was in tur-

moil because she remained childless for the last five years. Why maybe? That was indeed the case, he assured himself. In fact his very suspicion of her mental state occurred when he brought up the question of children in their conversation. At the time—

Rajam suddenly burst into laughter. Kannan felt her reaction very odd— bordering on hysteria. Realizing she was laughing beyond her control, he concealed his bewilderment over her reaction and struggled hard to calm her down. He was determined he would never again give her an opportunity to indulge in such hysterical outburst.

One day while returning from work, he heard some voices inside the house; steadying himself he stood close to the wall and listened to Rajam talking to herself. Subsequent incidents at home confirmed his suspicion that Rajam's mental condition badly needed his attention: she got extremely mad at her husband without any apparent reason; she turned hostile and began to whine when he said something innocuous; she seemed suddenly caught up in some thought – becoming silent when her husband tried to draw her into a conversation. So over the last ten days Kannan was keen that he should treat her with love, cooperation and understanding. His strategy seemed to have paid off because today she opened up to him, and said:

“You were telling me you wanted to see your doctor-friend. Today I have decided to go with you as soon as you return from work.” She had even dressed up as if ready to leave with him immedi-

ately.

Kannan hadn't expected this. Still he was happy that his handling of the situation over the last ten days had proved quite effective. Any hesitation on his part, he feared, might weaken her interest to see the doctor – and who knows? – She might even change her mind!

At the time Rajam was observing herself in a mirror and fixing her *kumkum*. Kannan set his briefcase on a nearby table, informed her he was going out to get a taxi and was about to leave at once without even changing his clothes. Rajam watched him through the mirror and laughed. It was similar to the laughter that scared Kannan the other day. He felt his original plan to take her to the doctor before she repeated that 'performance' has been seriously compromised and this threw him into utter confusion. Rajam was still watching him through the mirror and laughing. Nervous and determined to pacify her Kannan rushed to Rajam and begged her with entreaties, "Rajam, please, please . . . ."

He dare not ask her, "Why are you laughing like this!" He knew why!

But Rajam asked him: "Am I the only person going to your doctor-friend's house? Aren't you coming with me?"

"Yes, of course! How can it be otherwise? . . . Now, why did you ask me that question?" He probed deeply into her eyes. She tried to avert her face away from him. He asked her, again: "Why



did you ask me that question?"

He insisted on repeating the question because he felt her inquiry was totally absurd and couldn't have been made with any semblance of mental alertness. That doctor-friend was unknown to Rajam, and she didn't know his address, either. So if she wanted to know whether Kannan was also coming with her it could only mean one thing: she had reached a mental condition even more precarious than what Kannan had feared. He decided to leave with her - immediately.- to see the doctor.

"It is funny to see you in such a hurry! I got ready and was waiting for you so you wouldn't be unduly delayed. But as soon as you returned from work you look so muddled - you are rushing out to get the taxi! After all you too would be taking the taxi to the doctor. But you haven't yet washed your face; you also look as if you haven't shaved for the last three days! Are you sure you want to come like this?" She took out a small mirror from her handbag and brandished it in his face.

Kannan stared at his reflection in the mirror. It is true he has not shaved for the last two days. He rubbed his chin and tried to set right the curls of his cropped hair.

"Let me go and wash my face," he replied.. "Now I have no time to shave. I have the doctor's appointment at six." He deliberately lied about the doctor appointment and handed over his watch to Rajam before entering the bathroom to wash.

Rajam held his watch -casually between two

fingers – and continued to stand there even as she went on laughing to herself. Kannan who soon returned after washing found something terribly odd in Rajam's playful mood.

He wondered if she knew that he was lying about the doctor's appointment. He had thought for a long time that he should have secured the doctor's appointment before visiting him. But he didn't follow through with that idea because he was concerned what would happen if he got an appointment but Rajam refused to go. Again, contrary to what he had told Rajam, the concerned doctor was not a direct friend of Kannan's; the doctor was a friend of his colleague Raghavan at work. 'What's the big deal?' Kannan comforted himself: "After all I can always explain to the doctor that his friend Raghavan had referred me to him."

He washed and applied some powder to his face; when he emerged from the bathroom Rajam was still playing with his watch – holding it between her two fingers and admiring it. Kannan took the watch from her hands and wore it on his wrist. He again examined his clothes in a mirror, seemed satisfied and rushed out to fetch a taxi.

No sooner he returned with the taxi than Rajam was ready to get into it; she had already locked the house and was standing at the doorway as if ready to attend a wedding reception or go to a movie house. Just as Kannan had asked her she was dressed in clothes appropriate for a visit to a friend's house.

As soon as the taxi began to move, Rajam put away the house key into her handbag and reminded her husband in a tone tinged with excitement: "Let us stop on our way and pick up some fruits or flowers for your doctor-friend. Do they have any kids at home? We can also get some candies or biscuits for them!"

Kannan was really embarrassed. He was caught in confusion: 'Does that doctor have any children? Does he have a wife? Are they at home, now? Is it their home, really? It is probably a clinic.' He was beset by all kinds of questions.

"That won't be necessary," he assured his wife. "He is not just a doctor; he is also a personal friend. We can always visit him as if we are dropping by – informally." He was quite pleased with himself that he was smart enough to prepare Rajam for this visit.

Rajam was silent for a moment, then asked: "We will have to pay the doctor for this visit – don't you think?"

"So what, we can certainly pay him," Kannan answered. Rajam seemed lost in some thought. Thinking she might be unduly worried, Kannan fondly touched her hand and squeezed it while trying to put her at ease: "It is not necessary that only patients should visit doctors; healthy folks also can visit them for advice. After all, the mind also functions like the body. Whatever you may feel in your mind –whether it has to do with your anxieties, fears, or some other concerns unknown to you, feel

free to tell this doctor and you will experience some clarity.” Rajam didn’t say anything in return; she was simply nodding her head as if in agreement.

The clinic was located in a peaceful atmosphere amidst a huge garden full of trees. It was so close to the busy, noisy highway that the peace and quiet of the clinic seemed quite remarkable and a welcome change. Rajam was a little surprised when she alighted from the taxi and enjoyed the trees and their cool-shaded surroundings.

Kannan was about to pay off the cab driver and searched for his wallet in his shirt and trouser pockets. “I have the money, let me pay him off,” Rajam said and volunteered the fare to the taxi driver.

Just then, a fifty-year old doctor emerged from the clinic followed by an employee whom the doctor was berating over some dereliction of duty. He screamed ‘Get out’ at the employee and then noticed a couple alighting from a car.

Kannan had never seen that doctor before. His very appearance and voice scared him. As the doctor repeating his epithet ‘Get out’ a second time walked close to him Kannan greeted him and smiled. Rajam too offered her respects. The doctor changed his facial expression, returned their greetings and directed Rajam to the reception room with sofas and asked her to wait there.

Kannan secretly whispered to Rajam: “Maybe our timing is not quite auspicious.” Rajam laughed

away and replied: "Doctors are human too, it doesn't matter. After all he was nice to us, don't you think?"

"Do you think we can go back and come later?" Kannan asked her.

"But why? We have come all the way . . .you said he was your friend."

"Well . . . when I told you he was my friend . . . do you remember my friend Raghavan?"

"Which Raghavan you are talking about?"

"Oh, you don't know him? He works as an assistant engineer in our office. This doctor is his friend. Raghavan only mentioned this doctor to me." Kannan spoke slowly— in the manner of swallowing his own words.

"How does it matter now? We are already here, why don't we see him?" Rajam asked.

Soon a nurse appeared and invited them inside. They both entered the doctor's room shown by her.

"Come in, take your seats," the doctor addressed them in a friendly tone and directed them to two chairs. "What can I do for you?"

"Doctor, you know Mr. Raghavan? He is my friend. He referred me to you. I wanted to make a prior appointment, but . . ." Kannan suddenly stopped and looked at Rajam because he felt a little embarrassment in exposing his lie to her; Rajam too had an odd look at him, but Kannan con-

tinued:

“Anyway, I am here . . . . It is all right. Please meet my wife. The problem is . . .” He was beating around the bush how he should clarify the situation when Rajam, suddenly, intruded.

“Ssh . . .” she pressed her index finger against her lips and stopped Kannan— as if disciplining a child. Then she turned to the doctor.

“Doctor, I will explain the whole problem,” she said in clean, pure English. For a moment, Kannan was thrown into utter confusion.

“Go ahead,” the doctor told her. “Which Raghavan was he referring to?”

“He works in the telephones division. I am told he is an AE.”

“Oh, you mean Raghu? . . . We always call him Raghu. It is all right. Now you are the important person here. Go ahead.” The doctor was getting ready to listen to Rajam. His demeanor was very friendly; still his coarse, thick hair seemed to scare her.

Rajam continued to speak in English in a calm, clear voice: “Of late my husband has a problem sleeping at night. He seems confused. His actions seem a little odd. He doesn’t talk much. He hardly sleeps at nights! Not only that! He keeps preventing me from sleeping – waking me up with some kind of noise or the other.”

“Doctor, please listen to me, the reason is . . .” Kannan tried to intervene but the doctor cut in.

“Mr. Kannan, I will listen to you, shortly. Why not we let her speak first? After all, nothing is going on here! We are only having a friendly chat! Please think of me as a friend, not a doctor. Mr. Raghavan and you are friends, similarly I am your friend. . . Okay, madam, now, how do you know your husband is not sleeping?”

“That is what I was trying to explain; when I am sound asleep, my husband tries to wake me up by scratching on a glass tumbler or brushing his finger against the bed stand. On certain days he does this more than a few times; he silently spies on me at night. I am really scared. I am not saying he is mentally sick; but he seems really confused over something. That is all I have to say. I suppose his condition is not serious.”

“You are right, it’s nothing serious. This is normal for many people,” the doctor smiled and gently tapped on Kannan's shoulder. Kannan was irritated and also a little scared. He was determined to act brave and appear normal; smiling to himself, he stared at the doctor who felt Kannan's demeanor was wholly out of place.

“Well, you were trying to tell me something,” the doctor reminded Kannan.

“Yes, I need to talk to you,” Kannan took a look at Rajam sitting next to him. “I would like to talk with you in private.”

“Sure. Madam, can you please wait outside, if you don’t mind?” The doctor requested Rajam.

“Oh yes.”

Kannan turned around, lowered his voice and spoke in a tone tinged with laughter: ‘Doctor, I am not the patient, she is.’

“Nobody is a patient,” said the doctor and continued: “Mr. Kannan, what is your problem, any way? Are you afraid to be alone in the house? Is that the reason why you try to wake up people from their sound sleep? Still, that would be no crime. You can always discuss such matters with your wife.” He was exuding compassion.

‘Is he trying to comfort me because he suspects me?’ Kannan wondered and now spoke as if begging the doctor: “Doctor, please understand me. I am fine, on the other hand, she, my wife . . .”

“Go ahead,” the doctor urged him with a smile, which irritated Kannan. He composed himself, and continued:

“I brought my wife here because she is mentally sick. So if you want to talk, you better talk to her. I don’t need any treatment.” He rose from his chair, opened the room door and invited Rajam back into the doctor’s office. She looked quite serious as she entered the room and sat on a chair. Nobody spoke for a few minutes.

Rajam came close to Kannan and affectionately touched his arm. “You feeling okay?”

“I am leaving; are you coming with me or not?” Kannan asked her in a grave, authoritarian voice. The doctor was keenly observing him. The



doctor's brows now scared Rajam even more. She pathetically looked at him.

"Mister, will you please be seated?" The doctor's voice was sharp and grating.

"No, I won't," Kannan answered in a harsh tone and walked out of the room. The doctor spoke to Rajam in a soft voice: "If you are willing, I can treat your husband."

"Doctor, . . ." Rajam broke down.

"Be brave, there is nothing wrong with him. Please wait here, " the doctor said and went out. Rajam remained in the room and took out a handkerchief from the handbag and wiped the tears off her face. Still, she couldn't help crying . . .

The doctor emerging out of his office saw Kannan briskly walking toward the compound gate and he called out the employee whom he was berating only a while ago. He pointed out Kannan to him and said: "Go and get him; try to talk with him and settle the matter amicably." He returned to the office and spoke to Rajam, who was still crying . . .

"Don't worry! I will discuss the problem with your husband; let him rest here for two days, and he will be okay. Otherwise, he is fine."

Outside a commotion was heard; because Kannan was unwilling to give up voluntarily the clinic staff had subdued him with force and literally dragged him to the doctor's office. Kannan was mad and hollering, his shouts reaching the doctor's ears.

"I am not crazy! Your doctor's crazy! I didn't know he was a half-baked doctor! Looks like he would turn even normal folks if it helps him to make money! Rajam, don't trust him! Come on, let us go home! Rajam, please help me! Don't leave me to his mercy! Rajam, please . .

I am all right! I am not sick! Rajam, help me!” He was shouting hysterically as he was held up like a prisoner.

Rajam felt the situation unbearable. Sad and teary, she came out of the doctor’s office. The doctor understood her dilemma: under the circumstances should she or not take her husband home?

“Please consider me as your friend,” the doctor assured her. “You need to pay me no fee. Your husband will be safe here, in this clinic. You may go and come back tomorrow.”

As Rajam approached him, Kannan cast a pathetic look at her and begged, “Let’s go home!” even as he struggled to free himself from the men trying to restrain him.

“Of course we will go . . . How can I leave you here and stay at home with any peace of mind? Still, this is what the doctor is saying; he wants you to stay here for just one day-as his friend. He just wants to talk with you. Don’t be afraid. Be brave.” Rajam tried to comfort her husband.

Kannan stared back her in silence. “Okay, I will now go and see the doctor,” he said and pushed the men away and rushed to the doctor.

The doctor once again welcomed Kannan with a smile. He again cheered him up and engaged him in some conversation. Kannan didn’t utter a single word.

Rajam caressed Kannan’s curly locks and kissed his forehead. He cried when she bade him farewell; she too cried.

Rajam then asked one of the clinic’s employees to fetch a taxi for her. Kannan held on to her like a child and begged:

“Tomorrow you must return and take me home. There is nothing wrong with me. I am fine, believe me!” He spoke in a voice not audible to the doctor. Rajam too comforted him, saying, “Don’t worry, you will be fine here . . . I should be back tomorrow to take you home. . . Be brave.”

Soon a taxi arrived at the clinic. Kannan gave in to loud sobbing when Rajam got ready to leave and the doctor tapped mildly on Kannan’s back. Rajam, once again, held her husband’s hand and comforted him. Then she settled herself into the rear seat of the taxi and again wiped the tears off her face with a handkerchief.

As the taxi exited out of the compound gate the driver, who has been watching the events, asked Rajam: “Poor man, he looks normal. What is his problem, any way?”

Rajam laughed - again, the same laughter! The driver was a little scared and accidentally stepped on the brake. Rajam was still laughing to herself- totally oblivious to what was going on.

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Note:

Original title: **Araikuraigal** (1972)

## DON'T TRUST ME!

As usual Thangavel *Asari* called out his wife Maragatham to lock the main door from inside the house - following his departure to the smithy. After Maragatham responded with verbal assurance Thangavel dusted off the veranda with his towel and sat on it— leaning his back against a pillar. For the last four years this had become a daily routine for him – resting on the veranda for a few minutes before leaving for work.

Every day he felt – very early in the morning – acute pain in the stomach that seemed to abate only after he helped himself with two glasses of warm, rice-water gruel following his customary hot-water bath. Invariably he would experience terrible exhaustion following such temporary relief. Yet he would never confide in his wife either the pain or the exhaustion. Still weary and tired, he would put on the newly washed shirt and towel – making sure that the sacred ash on his forehead was not erased. Soon he would find his way to the veranda and call out his wife to lock the door behind him. Maragatham never knew that everyday Thangavel rested on the veranda for a few minutes before leaving home; that during his walk to his smithy two

furlongs away he again stopped at two more places and rested at one of them.

All this happened because Thangavel's health has slowly deteriorated over the years. More than four years ago his doctors almost gave up on him; they detected an ulcer in his stomach but assured him that it could be treated with medication; then one day Maragatham was scared to learn from the doctor that Thangavel would need surgery. Thangavel too was a little concerned because he was past fifty. But he felt it would be better to undergo surgery than endure the increments of pain - day after day. He was not really afraid of death; he was worried about his wife's future should he die, so he rejected surgery outright as an option. That was exactly what the doctor too meant: surgery would be expensive and there was no guarantee that the patient's health would actually improve. Under the circumstances Thangavel could die any time, and surgery could be risky. Thangavel fully understood what the doctor was saying and so did his wife. She began to cry and Thangavel wiped the tears off her face and consoled her:

“Stop worrying about anything,” he told her. “I am not going to leave you alone. There is someone more powerful than the doctor, and he is called God. He is not going to let us down. Don't lose your faith in Him.”

And he did survive the last four years. His trust in God has not failed him. Still, deep in his heart, Thangavel knew better: he was not living; he was actually dying, albeit slowly.

‘Maybe it is better to die than face this terrible agony,’ he grumbled to himself as he slowly made a frail move to the veranda. Why? Was he dejected because his body has been subjected to repeated assaults? Does death seem trifle when Fate is around the corner?

‘Still, why have I rested here so long?’ he asked himself and tried to get up. But the body refused to cooperate.

‘How about informing the folks at the smithy?’ he thought. ‘But how can I inform them?’ He was baffled. He instantly recalled his employer’s family- the family that provided him career and comfort for the last thirty-five years. Now that his health has deteriorated Thangavel’s workload had been drastically reduced; his duties were limited to supervising others at work; weighing the jewelry sold to and bought from the customers. Thangavel was gratified that he was still paid his full salary with reduced work load.

As long as he was alive, Thangavel knew he will be rewarded for his services and paid the salary to which he was entitled. But what happens after his death? Would the employer pay the survivor’s family too? Some were demanding that should be the norm. But Thangavel belonged to the old generation of workers who believed even to expect such a favor from the employer amounted to crime. That would become, simply, a charity! How could Thangavel let his family – his wife- end up in such pathetic situation? What could be more disgraceful? That was the reason

why he was determined to keep on working and making money. Occasionally he would be disconcerted by a sudden thought: someday Thangavel *Asari* is going to die, and who will take care of his wife Maragatham? Then the idea of his own death – slowly approaching - will take a step backward.

‘What if I had a child?’ His body would tingle at that fond notion. He will curl his lower lip and grumble in a tone of utter resignation: ‘Maragatham is not blessed with any such luck.’ Sometimes he would think: ‘If she dies before I do, the next day I will go out and have this surgery.’ But the very next moment another thought will cut in hastily: ‘My God, what if I survived the surgery? How can I live without Maragatham?’ His mind would be in turmoil and the eyes turn moist.

That was how he has been spending the last four years – in agony over the fact that he was hiding his true health condition from his wife; exhausted and depressed because he was losing himself in memories, dreams, fear and consolation.

‘Why am I still sitting here?’ His mind pulled him away from the veranda. Still, the body refused to move . . .

‘The time should be now past eight-thirty? Am I stuck here for the last half-an hour?’

While the body still lay on the veranda his mind raced ahead – reminding him of his daily routine – slowly, in images unfolding before him . . .

He slowly plods his way from the veranda to the street corner where he stops for a few minutes firmly gripping the street light pole. He wipes his face with the towel making sure he didn't erase the sacred ash on the forehead. He proceeds further on the Big Street and nears the Naicker Shop where he finds an excuse to stop and buy a *beedi* for half-an-anna. He stops there for five minutes – clutching at a soda stand opposite to the shop. Then he takes leave of Naicker and walks to the next street which brings him to a shrine comprising a few idols and a serpentine icon under a *pipal* tree next to a lake. Here he finds a small raised platform close by, dusts it off with his towel, rests on it for a while and lights the *beedi* –which would soon bring vigor to his walk. That was the best thing about *beedi* – something totally unknown to Maragatham or his doctor. Only Thangavel knows and it was a secret pleasure he indulges in. That secret pursuit finally takes him close to the '*Murugan Jewelry Mart*' and after a short walk on the adjoining lane he finds himself in the rear of the smithy. Because the time is not yet eight-thirty all the employees stand up and welcome Thangavel with the respect he deserved because of his age and experience. Thangavel then eases himself into one of the chairs. Soon a boy shows up from the owner's house and delivers him the shop key. Thangavel started his career in the smithy under the grandfather of the present owner.

Even after Thangavel's mind, while he lay on the veranda, descended upon his employer and his coworkers and took leave of them after some for-



mal inquiries to return to his fold, he couldn't simply get off the veranda.

'Have I actually taken leave of them? Has that time already arrived? What happens to Maragatham after I am gone? What about her brother in the neighboring village -the one who visits her once in two years with a bagful of peanuts and returns home the very next day - as if to demonstrate his familial obligations? Is he going to take care of her? No, you can't blame him. He is not like us - the unfortunate barren souls! He has a family to take care; after all, he won't be making a lot of money in the village! All said and done, he may have to take care of Maragatham as an extra burden. If your own sibling pleads for your help, how can you refuse?'

As he slowly stirred himself and steadied his back resting against the pillar Thangavel lost the balance and suddenly found himself drop down on the veranda. Fortunately he was not hurt on any part of his head. With one of his arms propping up his head he looked like someone resting - in a normal posture - on the veranda.

He was now fully aware of what was going on: 'Thangavel may die any moment' was the message his doctors had conveyed to him many years ago; at the time Thangavel was not sure if he had actually heard those words. Now those words rang in his ears - loud and clear. 'What will Maragatham do if I die suddenly? She will be devastated and start crying, will she be sane enough to pull herself together and understand her helpless situation?'

What if she doesn't realize that the only person who could offer her help is her brother? What if she forgets to inform her brother and he, in turn, felt offended by her attitude and refused to offer her any help? My God, I must ask Maragatham at once to write to her brother . . . That would be one of my final obligations . . .'

His clothes – washed clean in pure white resembling a jasmine – were now soiled in the dirt from the veranda. He lay there with no intention of getting up. His thoughts seemed put on hold, he was also becoming incoherent.

'Why am I like this, today?' The question took shape deep in his heart and soon he got an answer: 'Yes, this is how things are – today.'

Suddenly he felt a convulsion followed by an acute pain – rising from deep down his gut and reaching to his chest – culminating in a hiccup. The warm, rice-water gruel he had earlier that morning now gushed from his mouth and fell on his shoulder. A few flies swarmed around it. His lips quivered with intent to drive them away, but his hand was numb and felt wooden.

Maragatham who entered the kitchen after her customary bath carrying the wet sari on her shoulder noticed the rice in the vessel was overcooked and turned sticky. She immediately attended to it – without even changing her clothes; with a metal ladle she transferred a few morsels of the overcooked rice to another vessel and splintered the

contents by poking and stirring them with the ladle. Then she tied up the wet sari to the pillars on the porch and got herself into a new one hanging from a rope strung across the porch. Then she smeared her forehead with turmeric and donned a large *kumkum*, walked into the inner courtyard, looked up at the sky and worshipped the sun. Then she returned to the kitchen, added some sugar to the milk-rice-gruel in another vessel and transferred the contents into a previously cleaned brass container. She added some salt to the rice-water gruel, helped herself with a pickle and washed down her mouth with two glasses of rice-water gruel.

This has been her regimen for the last four years: Thangavel got rice-water gruel in the morning and the milk-rice-gruel twice a day. How could Maragatham afford to prepare two different items for two individuals? Maragatham would occasionally help herself with some milk-rice gruel- after removing the cream. Once in a while, when she felt her tongue turned sluggish and wanted to taste something hot or sour, she would prepare a soup with some spice or tamarind. She couldn't afford any other luxury.

After gulping down the rice-water gruel in a hurry she picked up the brass container and a new glass. She also took out two ten-rupee notes from a box in the kitchen corner and the Savings Accounts Book stored in a rice container and tucked them into her waist. Today she needed to take care of some additional chores, so she helped herself

with the rice-water gruel. Otherwise, she would first go to the smithy, personally deliver the two glasses of milk-rice-gruel to her husband, return home and then help herself with what was left.

Thangavel doesn't know anything about this Savings Bank Account. Maragatham struggled very hard to do this without her husband's knowledge. Still, how could she bring herself to reveal the truth to him: 'I am trying to save money from your income – to take care of myself after you are gone?'

Yes. Granted a wife has to demonstrate marital loyalty, devotion and respect to her husband. But there is something else. Once she becomes a widow the wife is left to her own devices to carry on in this strange, unpredictable world.

Maragatham does have relatives – but they would render her any help only if and when they realized they would personally gain something from such a gesture. Once she has been deprived of any right or claim to expect help from her husband or offspring, how could she possibly expect anything from others – whose relationship, at best, remains dubious? She has learnt a few bitter lessons in her fifty-year life.

Four years ago when the doctors gave up on her husband's health Maragatham instantly recalled the fate of another woman – Vellaiammal – who led a prosperous life when her husband was alive – but ended up as a widow and a destitute who was unceremoniously abandoned by her close relatives.

The last images of her life –as a beggar loitering around the temple premises and as a corpse cast away amidst the large temple corridor – were all that remained in Maragatham’s memory.

That was the reason why she was determined to deal with the sad, but realistic situation that would confront her as a widow. She saved twenty out of the salary of seventy five rupees– which Thangavel faithfully handed over to her every month. She managed to do this by cutting corners, here and there, scrupulously weighing in every item of expenditure however small and essential and always making sure that her husband’s needs were never compromised. Once in a while she will ponder: why not spend those twenty rupees to buy some medicine that might help prolong her husband’s life? Still she could not afford to be that generous – given the prevailing condition in her household. It would often make her feel that she was being disloyal to her husband.

God forbid - should Thangavel’s death occur suddenly – she needed to seek refuge under her brother’s care. Then, this cash might come in handy.

She opened the Savings Accounts Book and checked the balance. She had saved nearly a thousand rupees.

That amount belongs neither to her husband nor even to her. It would finally accrue to her brother or his son – her nephew - who would be performing the last rites for Maragatham. That was the

scheme Maragatham worked out to guarantee her own future – till the day she breathed her last – a scheme more reliable than her husband and their mutual love.

“My God! How could I be so mean!” She cursed to herself.

But she also realized the truth: she was born in a mean world, lived in mean times and perforce must deal with mean consequences; so she cast her faith on those saved rupees. She picked up the Savings Account Book and the two ten-rupee bills and tucked them into her waist. As she opened the door and stepped with the lock and key in hand she was horrified to see her husband lying flat on the veranda, and screamed.

Two men on the street rushed to her help. They lifted Thangavel and helped him sit on the veranda. Maragatham held his head with her hand and cleaned his mouth with the tip end of her sari.

Thangavel slowly opened the eyes and raised them towards Maragatham as she bowed down her head toward him. A faint smile appeared on his face.

“There is no danger to his life,’ said the men who came to help her.

She knew better; his life was in danger.

With the help of the two men Maragatham was able to carry Thangavel inside the house and put him to bed. She poured the milk-rice-gruel from the brass container into a glass and brought it to

his lips; Thangavel narrowed his eye-brows and pursed his lips signaling aversion. From his gestures she understood he wanted only plain water; she ran to the kitchen, brought some warm water and helped him drink it. He quickly swallowed three mouthfuls.

Then he let out a mild cough. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he desperately smiled at Maragatham who now held his head on her lap. His voice growing fainter Thangavel told her, "Maragatham, I am all right, have no fear."

The men who came to help now seemed relieved, and said: "It is nothing serious, he seems to have fainted." They assured her and left.

The couple now exchanged glances, in silence.

Thangavel was still not fully conscious; even as he was closely looking at his wife he felt his eyes were being dragged back to sleep. He shuddered to think he might be close to death. He again stared at her.

"Did you eat?" he mumbled.

"Forget it! . . . Now . . . don't say anything." She cautioned him.

'If you haven't eaten, you better go now and eat . . . I am not going to die any time soon.' His mind was entreating her.

"Why don't you have some milk-rice-gruel?" she asked and brought the glass close to his lips. He took a sip but averted his face away when she tried to offer him more.

He continued to gaze at her intensely when she returned to the kitchen carrying the vessels.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she wanted to know. “Shall I call the doctor?”

Thangavel let out a mild laugh, and now spoke with some clarity in his voice: “The doctor had given up on me four years ago. Now the biggest of all the doctors – God – is also going to give up on me.”

Maragatham cried – while stuffing the tip of the sari into her mouth.

“Maragatham . . . You are like an innocent baby! Were you blessed with a baby – it would have taught you about the real world . . . Why talk about it -we were denied that privilege . . .” He remained silent for a moment.

Then he spoke, his eyes still teary: “Have I fulfilled my obligation to you? When I think of all your sacrifices – I worship you as a goddess! Can you please check my shirt pocket?” Maragatham took out two ten-rupee bills and a five-rupee bill from his shirt pocket.

“Maragatham, you must forgive me! I lied to you that my salary was seventy five rupees. Actually, for the last four years, my monthly salary was one hundred rupees. My soul will never be at rest if I abandoned you as a destitute after my death. So I had opened a bank account in your name – where I put away twenty five rupees every month. I didn’t tell you about this – because I didn’t want



you to feel upset that I am saving money for you after my death – even when I am alive. I deliberately wanted to conceal this from you. Please send a wire to your brother; he is the only one you have got. Don't trust me!" Thangavel could go no further.

"I am the sinner," Maragatham screamed and in despair smashed her head against a pillar.

Blood oozed from her forehead. The tears and the *kumkum* messed up her face as she grabbed the Pass Book and the money - her future guarantor—and gave in to loud sobbing:

"My *Raja!* When I did really trust you – to stop trusting you now? I have been so selfish! You think I am an innocent baby, do you realize what I have actually done?" She brandished the Pass Book in his face.

What would Thangavel *Asari* say? He was already gone!

"My God! I don't need this money, I only need you!" She cast away the contents from her hand into the air and fell on his body—sobbing incessantly.

'Maragatham, you and I would need no money; but this world needs the money. You did nothing wrong; the world would never trust a dead man, it would only trust his wealth because it considers only money as permanent and everlasting.' If it is true that men hover as ghosts after their death over their survivors, then in all probability Thangavel *Asari* would have shared those warm sentiments with his wife.

But he would have certainly changed his opinion of Maragatham as an innocent baby. To come to think of it, even Maragatham's anguish was not just over her husband's death, but over the erosion of his trust in her.

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Note: Original title: *Ennai Nambaade!* (1962)

## THE LOW CLASS

**S**o you wanna sit here on this dump weeping in the dark? What the hell, forget that scum - call it a good riddance . . .”

The woman who has been weeping all along while seated on a pile of stones next to the railway line branching off into five or six tracks, had expected neither that voice nor its owner. Overcome by shock and fear, she sprang from where she sat.

An electric train from afar came shrieking and sped past the man and woman; from its shaft of light the man now saw even more clearly the woman’s face with bruises, swollen lips and large eyes. The woman instantly covered her face tightly with both hands because she was overcome by shame at the man staring at her pathetic face and also by the brightness of the light piercing her eyes. Long after the train was gone she continued to cover her face with both hands and went on sobbing, incessantly, while ranting:

“Go away! Why did you come here? Leave me alone . . I want to throw myself in front of the train . . . I certainly deserve this punishment for betraying you.” As she went on and on, the man too wiped the tears off his face - either because he was reminded of the woman’s betrayal or because

he now watched her in terrible pain repenting for her past sins. He suppressed his own feelings and fought off the tears; he raised his head to the sky and let out a deep sigh.

The woman continued to stand there sobbing; the man stood next to her without making his feelings public.

“I expected something like this, yea,” the man began.” It is true, but what can we do? Now, don’t blame yourself, you don’t have to kill yourself over this. You must tell me where you want to go, and I will take you there . . . I owe it to myself because we lived together for the last two and half years. . Let me take you back to your village, this city is no good for you. If you stay here any longer you will end up even worse. Yes, listen to me, you must go back to your village . . .”

Another electric train now rushed toward them from the opposite direction, and the woman now riveted her eyes on the man. His eyes were closed under the bright light. She imagined his face twisting and grinning in utter disgust at her very presence.

And she continued to bow her head down because she thought the man was fully justified in despising her and avoiding any contact with her. How could she possibly expect his continued interest in her? Why should he come forward to rescue her from utter helplessness? Even if he did, how could she shamelessly bring herself to accept his help? All these thoughts crossed her mind as she stood there scratching the front of her right leg resting on the ground. The man broke the silence,

and spoke. The words came as if he grasped the situation on hand like an ordinary, decent, human being with no reference to their relationship - either as a husband and wife or as a victim and abuser.

“I don’t get this . . . You are saying you want to kill yourself. A short while ago, when I saw you, I thought you were just crazy - you seemed lost, you were crying and your hair was all messed up - I actually thought the worst was going to happen. I got scared, my stomach started churning . . . I wanted to follow you in my rickshaw, but I was scared people would gather around us to see what is going on . . . So I took a side road - Gengureddi Road - and started pedaling as fast as I could . . . Luckily the rail gate was not yet closed. I was trying to take a left turn near the gate when I suddenly saw you wandering alone on the rail track. I even thought I can catch up with you near Chetpet rail station . . . But then, you know what? As I came close to Poondamalli Highroad, this goddamn thing suddenly broke down - the chain got loose. By the time I fixed the chain and came to Neru Park, I saw you standing here. So I dropped the rickshaw on the road and rushed here . . . Now, you may be thinking why I should come here . . . What do I care what you really think, anyway? I am the fellow who married you and brought you from the village to this city, so I hold myself responsible for whatever happens to you. . . . Yea, I know I am doing the right thing . . .

Now you may ask: ‘You brought me to the city, but I ran away with another man, and what have

you got to do with me?’ That’s what everybody in the village keeps asking me. What do they know about me, anyway? But you know me, don’t you, and if you don’t, let me tell you right away . . . What if you ran away with another man? Am I here to take you back home and start my life all over again with you? Don’t think anything like that and throw me out . . . Whether you want to live with me or not, am I not the fellow who married you - didn’t I tie the knot in a ritual before the village elders? So I have a right to be here . . . Now, nobody is going to question me if I let you die here under the train, but my conscience wouldn’t let me do such a thing. It will keep asking me: ‘After all she is an ordinary village girl, she lost her head, went astray, and she finally paid a heavy price. Poor girl, she is now dead, and you are to be blamed for her death’. How can I answer my conscience? That’s the reason I am here.

Now, we have not been together for the last six months, but we lived together for two years; during that time did I ever quarrel with you? Did I ever say anything rude or do anything to hurt your feelings? Did you ever complain you were hungry or needed money? Did you ever complain I was drinking or loafing around? Were we not happy those days? I think we were happy, we loved one another . . . then something happened, some evil eye caught us, suddenly things came apart . . . but why talk about it, it is all over . . .

What is the point in two people hanging on to a relationship when they are not happy with one another? For some reason or other, my wife didn’t

want to live with me, and she left me for another man. I asked myself: maybe I should look for another woman . . .

I certainly thought of doing something like that, but you know what? I know you, and I also know the creep you ran away with. Now, what do you know about this world, anyway? You are just a child, the city looks bright and flashing to your eyes, you stand before it completely taken by those outside attractions. Let me say this: you never deceived me, you deceived only yourself; yes, you deceived only yourself . . .”

Like arrows, his outpouring of words, now and then interrupted by pauses, deep sighs, delivered with all their suppressed intensity, pierced the woman’s heart; as shame swept all over her body, she laid her soul bare at his feet.

“My God, why should I live any longer?” Now, fully aware of her loss - what was snatched away from her by her own folly - she grew desperate, clapped a hand over her head, and squatted on the ground.

“Don’t cry, don’t,” the man tried to console the woman, climbed over the pile of stones and sat next to her. His shirt was soggy with sweat and torn across the torso. He pulled out a *beedi* from a shirt pocket. He searched for a matchbox from another pocket, and failing to find one, he stood up on the pile of stones, found the match box from a side pocket in his shorts, and lit the *beedi*. He inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs, savored it, let the smoke escape through his mouth and nostrils and then examined the woman’s face, thought-

fully. The woman sat there, still crying in low murmurs, her body cringing in shame, her legs stumped together on the ground, her face brushing against the raised knees.

The woman's pathetic sight brought back pain and anguish - even keener than what he had endured in the last six months. As he fought off the tears and tried to control his feelings, he felt his whole heart ravaged and in turmoil.

He spoke in a gruff voice.

“Get this right away. I am speaking to you not as your husband ... that relationship is a recent one, just over two years, but I knew you even before that . . . as a girl you used to call me ‘uncle’ and we used to wander off outside into fields and farms. What was our relationship in those days? Whenever I came down to your village from the city you and your sister would come to me and demand I give you money and tell stories . . . All that love and affection between us - was it actually based on that relationship? To tell the truth, I never thought of marrying you - that happened because you were an orphan and I was fond of you . . . and when the elders in the village suggested that I marry you, how can I refuse? When I came to know some of the city girls I found them disgusting, and avoided them . . . It is true I wanted to marry someone - a nice, decent girl from my own neighborhood - but I am willing to take an oath on *Iyengar* and say this: before the village elders’ telling me that I take you as a bride, I never imagined such a thing was possible. Then, I told myself: this girl is very nice to me, why not I marry her?”

Where can I possibly get a better wife? That's what really happened. If you don't want to live with me, that's fine with me. Does it mean my love and affection for you will suddenly disappear? All that affection we shared when we were together - do you mean to say - it is all false? That's the kind of relationship I am talking about - that's why I am here . . .

Now, tell me, why do you have to kill yourself? What happened, any way? It's no big deal. You ran away with another man, but did you go with the right man?

I can forget the whole thing and feel contented that you are happy with someone, somewhere . . . but this fellow is a parasite! He gets hold of young, decent girls, takes care of them for three months and then dumps them as street walkers! He can't earn anything decent by his own efforts! He can't do any work! And you thought he is going to take care of you! I don't know if I should cry or laugh at your innocence!

That's why for the last six months I am in total confusion. . . I know you lost your mind and ran away with that wretch . . . I also know sometime in the future you will end up living on the streets . . . Even if I can't live with you, I must make plans for your future. Without those plans how can I possibly start life with another woman? If I did that will I be here now? Let us say I don't show up here, and you throw yourself under the train. Then, who is going to answer for your death? That low-life or me? It was I who knew everything about that scoundrel, yet let you go after him . . .”



As he went on and on, his words stirred the woman deeply - illuminating, again and again, her dark mind, making her come to grips with her pathetic condition. His words were interrupted only by the occasional sounds of the trains approaching their vicinity in the opposite directions.

The man was feeling sorry for himself, and unbeknownst to her, weeping silently. Even as he felt assured that the woman would not be able to notice, in the darkness, the tears flowing down his cheeks, he suspected she might find out when he lit his *beedi*. So he shifted his head slightly to the left and cleared his nose. Continuing to smoke in silence, he stared at his cycle rickshaw afar on the Poondamalli Highroad, and let out a deep sigh.

“I made no money in the last six months . . . What is the point of making money? The rickshaw needs fixing too. . . I have been thinking of repair for the last three months . . . What’s the big deal? I couldn’t care less. If I feel hungry, I go out and pick up a passenger. If I am in no mood to work, I simply go hungry! Was I ever like this before? Have you ever seen me before in a torn shirt?” There was a brief flash of light when he raised his head, and now the woman had a very good look at him.

The disheveled head, unshaven beard, a sweaty damp shirt torn across the chest, the rickety bones visible through the gaping hole. She responded with a sob, held her head with both hands, and wept even louder.

“Don’t weep over this, . . . what was supposed to have happened has already happened. Do you

know how often I wept when that scumbag, fully drunk, used to beat you up? I used to tell myself: 'She was so happy, and now see what has become of her!' I felt your pain like a father, a brother or some stranger . . .

That's how I now stand before you. I am not here as your husband. In a way it is good that bum dumped you so soon . . . Now I will take you back to your village . . . We will meet with the village *panchayat* and annul our marriage . . . Then you can do whatever you want . . . I too will find a woman and live my life. . . Let us not waste our lives . . . What do you say? You don't have to say anything, let's just get the hell out of here. There is a train at ten thirty. Let us go. I know how your mind works. If not today, some other day you may want to kill yourself . . . You don't know anything about this world, you are just a child. . . that's why, I can never get mad at you."

"No, I don't want to go back to the village . . . You must push me in front of the train, and kill me. I will gladly accept death from your hands." Sobbing, the woman stood up and joined both her palms in a gesture as if begging him for a favor.

"Are you crazy?" the man screamed aloud. "Are you telling me your parents got us married so I would push you under a train?" He raised his voice as if rebuking her.

"No, but I deserve that punishment for what I did. You must push me under the train."

"Shut up," he screamed again. "How do you think the police would act if I ever did such a thing?" He scampered down the pile of stones

thinking that if they stayed there any longer her suicide plan might gather strength.

As he came close to her, she arose and stared at him with intense anxiety and uncontrollable pain. His look made her sadness even more intense and her copious tears blinded her eyes. She could no more bear the pain. She grabbed both his hands and sobbed incessantly.

“It doesn’t matter whether you leave me back in my village or push me under the train right here,” she screamed. “I am a whore . . .”

“So that’s what is bothering you?” the man admonished her. “Now, tell me, what is your crime, anyway? Are you telling me people never make mistakes? For that matter, I don’t think it was a mistake on your part. If a woman leaves someone because she doesn’t want to live with him, can you call it a crime? Your only crime is that you went for something that didn’t work out right for you. Now you can go to the village and find someone you really like, and marry him.”

“My God, don’t say such a horrible thing!” she cried again. “I didn’t leave you because I didn’t like you. I can’t explain why I left you . . . I guess I became greedy . . . you are only a rickshaw driver, and I heard someone say you would be a rickshaw driver for the rest of your life. So, just like you said, I became attracted to flashy things and ended up as a bad woman . . .”

A train now came along and as it awaited a signal to proceed further, it stopped close to the man and woman. Under close scrutiny, the pair now took a full measure of one another.

His eyes teary, the face shrunk from weeping, the man moved his lips and asked the woman:

“Is it true? You didn’t leave me because you didn’t like me or wanted to live with me? Really? Tell me, do you still like me? Do you want to live with me?” His questions, addressed in quick succession yet in a slowly declining voice, ended with a secret message: “Do you still like me?” whispered right at the woman’s face, along with a tight grip of her shoulder.

The woman reacted as if she was waiting only for this very question and physical intimacy. Her heart eagerly seeking warmth and excitement, and still crying, she leaned on his body, and found refuge in his embrace.

Their two hearts now mingled into one; they understood one another and they now lived for one another.

In the darkness following the train’s departure, secret words - terms of endearment - emerged from their hearts. .

“Uncle, will you forgive me? I betrayed you, didn’t I? I am a bad girl . . .”

“You goddamn donkey . . you talk too much! You have a heart of gold, so nothing else matters! For that matter, I too was a bad guy once - that was before I married you . . .”

“Uncle . . .”

“You donkey, stop crying . . .”

“Uncle, that’s what I really like about you. Please call me donkey, just like you always used to - in the good old days. That word brings back to me all those sweet memories. I want to forget eve-

everything that has happened since . . .”

“You donkey, I know . . . that’s why I keep calling you donkey . . .”

“Uncle . . .”

“Donkey . . .”

The man continued to cuddle her with his own language of love.

Do you think his language is low brow – crude and in poor taste?

Yes. But can you judge a man solely by his language?

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Note:

Original title: *Tharak Kuraiyu* (1963)

## GLOSSARY

*Asari*

Title indicating one's profession—a goldsmith.

*Athan*

A term of endearment.

*Beedi*

A rudimentary cigarette made by rolling tobacco leaf. It is very cheap but quite harsh on one's throat.

*Bharathiyar*

Honorific term for Subramania Bharati, Tamil poet and social reformer.

*Iyenar*

A guard deity found in Tamil Nadu villages.

*Jnanapith Award*

In Sanskrit, jnanpith means 'seat of knowledge.' Instituted in 1961, it is the country's highest literary award given to an Indian writer for outstanding contribution to literature.

*Kumkum*

Saffron powder worn on the forehead, usually, by women as a sign of auspiciousness.

*Raja*

A term of endearment.

*Sahitya Academy*

Established by the Government of India in 1954 to foster and coordinate literary activities in all Indian languages, and thereby promote the cultural unity of India.

*Thali*

A gold chain or turmeric-smearred cord with holy pendants tied by the bride room around the bride's neck at the wedding.

*Thilakavathi*

A Tamil saint, sister of Tamil Saint Appar. Thilakavathi chose a life of widowhood following the death of the man engaged to her but who had a premature death without actually marrying her.

*Tulasi*

Basil plant considered sacred.

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# JAYAKANTHAN

## MADE IN HEAVEN and other stories

Translated from Tamil by Andy Sundaresan

Jayakanthan, a household name in the Tamil literary world, received the Jnanapeeth Award, the highest literary recognition in India, in March 2005. Writer, journalist, essayist, pamphleteer, filmmaker, and critic, Jayakanthan has been challenging his readers and critics both in form and content. He now lives in Chennai, India, and is regarded as the foremost contemporary Tamil writer.

Following the tradition of *Till Death Do Us Part*, here is a collection of short stories displaying Jayakanthan's depth of knowledge and feelings of characters, setting, and situation - all assembled under a common theme: marriage.

Andy Sundaresan, born in India and settled in the United States for the last 30 years, started translating Jayakanthan's stories in the late 1990's. His first short story collection, *Trial by Fire*, was introduced by Jayakanthan at the Federation of Tamils of North America (FeTNA) annual convention in July 2000. Sundaresan loves Carnatic music, classic films, New York Times crossword puzzles, and spending time with his two daughters. He lives in El Cerrito, California.

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