

A classical radical

Tamil writer **Thi. Janakiraman (1921-1982)** was a modernist whose fiction explored the man-woman relationship and its tangles in a changing world, and for him writing was an act of resistance against the Brahmin orthodoxy he had been raised in. BY **ABHIRAMI GIRIJA SRIRAM**

THI. JANAKIRAMAN, or Thi Jaa, as he was fondly known, is instantly recognisable to more than one generation of Tamil readers as the author of subversive novels such as *Mohamul* (Thorn of Desire) and *Amma Vandhaal* (translated twice into English as *The Sins of Appu's Mother* and *Remembering Amma*). His writing career was flagged off by *Manikkodi*, a little magazine that set the benchmark for modernism in Tamil literature in the 1930s. Thi Jaa wrote and published over 150 short stories, nine novels, seven novellas and four travelogues. He also translated world literature into Tamil, including Swedish writer Par Lagerqvist's *The Dwarf* and Italian writer Grasia Deledda's *The Mother*. In 1979, he won the Sahitya Akademi award for his short story collection *Sakthi Vaithyam*.

In a 1962 essay titled “Eth-arkkaga ezhuthugiren” (“Why I write”), Thi Jaa stated his credo with simple candour: “Writing gives me much pleasure; it is a composite pleasure—like the pleasure of love: there is the thrill of expectation, the pain of disappointment, the joy of the union—but altogether it is a pleasure.... And I write about matters I know. About the people I know and about the things I know. I never write about things I do not know.”

Thanjavur was Thi Jaa's terroir. It was where he was born in 1921 and where he lived until his thirties, and what he knew and wrote about best. As the cliché goes, you can inhale the



lush green scent of the Cauvery delta in Thi Jaa's writing. Steeped in Thanjavur's cultural ethos, his novels are a heady brew of tradition and transgression. Time and again, they explore the man-woman relationship and its endless tangles in a rapidly changing world, seeking particularly to understand the inner workings of the minds of the women.

THI JAA'S WOMEN

The women in Thi Jaa's fictional universe—Yamuna in *Mohamul* (1964); Alankaram and Indu in *Amma Vandhaal* (1966); Kunjammal and Bhuvana in *Semparuthi* (1968); Ammani in *Marappasu* (1975)—are all acts of radical imagination. They light up the narrative with their ex-

traordinary grace and elegance. They may not have the benefit of education and employment, or the backing of wealth and property, but they own their bodies and minds, are frank and forthright about their heart's desires, and utterly unmindful of the boundaries that tradition and society have drawn around them.

In Thi Jaa's fiction, eros is more than a personal expression between two people. Fortified by consent, it is a powerful expression of individual freedom and autonomy; indeed, it is the very life force which keeps the characters going. And relationships are held together not by social custom or moral obligation but by a tumult of intense emotion. This *sturm und drang* is what made Thi Jaa's fiction both unique and vulnerable to flak in the times they were written in, but just as timeless and immediate well over half a century later.

The occasion of Thi Jaa's centenary year has seen a resurgence of interest in his life and works. The most notable commemoration is an encyclopaedic volume titled *Janakiramam*, compiled by Professor R. Kalyanaraman and published by Kalachuvadu in June 2021. It is the first of a kind, with as many as 101 essays in Tamil (and a lone essay in English)



'JANAKIRAMAM: Essays on Thi Janakiraman's works', compiled by Kalyanaraman (Kalachuvadu, 2021).

that deep-dive into Thi Jaa's expansive oeuvre from diverse perspectives, all connected by the strong thread of passion for his writing.

RECENT TRANSLATIONS

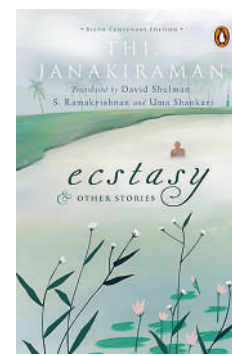
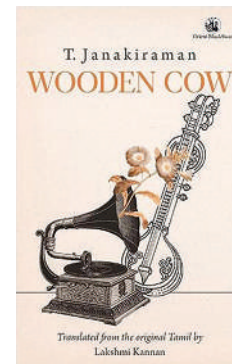
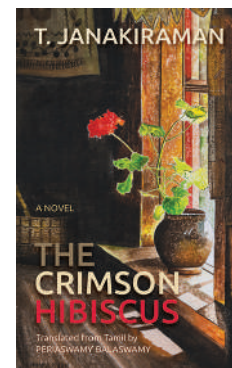
The year 2021 also saw the publication of three of Thi Jaa's works, two novels and a collection of short fiction, in English translation. *Semparuthi*, translated into English by Periyaswamy Balaswamy as *The Crimson Hibiscus*, and published by Ratna Sagar, is a sweeping generational saga that begins in pre-independent India and arcs over 40 years of the life of Sattanathan Pillai. Although it seems to dwell on Sattanathan, his moral dilemmas and his tightrope walk between aspiration and reality, *Semparuthi* is equally the stories of the three women in Sattanathan's life, especially his wife Bhuvana, she of the eponymous crimson hibiscus in her hair. In *Semparuthi*, Thi Jaa invests an ordinary story with extraordinary nuance and insight, and turns it into a study of psychological realism.

Thi Jaa's *Marappasu*, translated into English by Lakshmi Kannan as *Wooden Cow*, holds the unique distinction of having been translated by the same person (and published by the same publisher, Orient Blackswan) twice in the span of 40 years. A novel about free will, *Marappasu* is also the emotional history of its flamboyant protagonist, the Bharatanatyam dancer Ammani, who, quite literally, wants to embrace the world. Ammani lives life on her own terms, both when she pursues multiple intimate relationships through the narrative and when she considers the possibility of com-

mitment to one partner towards the end. In either case, she simply exercises agency and refuses to kowtow to patriarchy.

In her essay prefacing *Wooden Cow*, titled “A Dappled Deer or a Growling Leopard?”, the translator Lakshmi Kannan confesses: “Translating a text is one thing, but revising an existing translation is an entirely different proposition altogether. The language of a translation done so many years ago would expectedly be archaic. Words have their own mortality. Words change in connotation, and time in turn deposits a new colour or sheen or the dust of obsolescence on the same word.”

Admittedly, Thi Jaa's works are a challenge to translate, not least



because the cultural idioms, the music, the humour and the cadences of the Thanjavur Tamil dialect “with cunning and half-spoken innuendoes” that pervade his narrative do not readily yield their riches in another language. However, both *The Crimson Hibiscus* and *Wooden Cow* open new doors, and will hopefully draw new legions of readers into Thi Jaa's world of wonders.

If Thi Jaa's novels are vast canvases of desire and longing, his short stories are keen, deft slices of life. Eleven of his most-loved short stories have been collected in a volume titled *Ecstasy and Other Stories*, translated by David Shulman along with Tamil publisher Cre-A Ramakrishnan (who passed away in 2020) and Thi Jaa's daughter Uma Shankari, and published by Penguin Random House India. Several of these, such as the title story “Si-

lirppu” (1953), “Seythi” (1955), “Paradesi vandhaan” (1956), “Mulumudi” (1958) and “Payasam” (1971), have enjoyed a cult following down the years and were among the most popular readings shared on YouTube during the pandemic.

Description and dialogue are the meat and marrow of these stories, which dwell on the dreams, disappointments and the many pettinesses of middle-class men and women you come to know and love and care for in the course of a plot twist. A master of the *mot juste*, Thi Jaa records the idiosyncrasies of people around him with relish and a gentle, puckish humour that bears no trace of malice.

For all that, Thi Jaa's writing was not without its share of moral indignation either. In his introduction titled “Subtleties of the Heart”, David Shulman writes: “Like other Tamil writers of his time, he was a trenchant social critic. His sense of injustice comes through in his handling of matters of conscience. Many of the stories speak of some tragic set of events, almost always laconically expressed or suggested, as if he wanted, intuitively, to let his readers come to their own conclusions and to feel in their bodies the intensity of his characters' pain—also of the author's pain. But disaster, in a Thi Jaa tale, is often the trigger for insight that can heal and transform the mind. One is not left with the starkness of tragedy or the unmitigated presence of wickedness. In fact, there seem to be no true, unredeemed villains in the entire Thi Jaa corpus.”

Thi Jaa was a modernist and an aesthete in the best sense of the word, a man deeply rooted in his times and terroir, for whom writing was an act of resistance against the Brahmin orthodoxy he had been raised in. The real world of his stories, the villages and the people and the way of life he describes, have all passed into oblivion. But the shimmering world of his words, which, like his women, cannot be hemmed in by the diktats of convention and will not fade into the background, is sure to endure. □