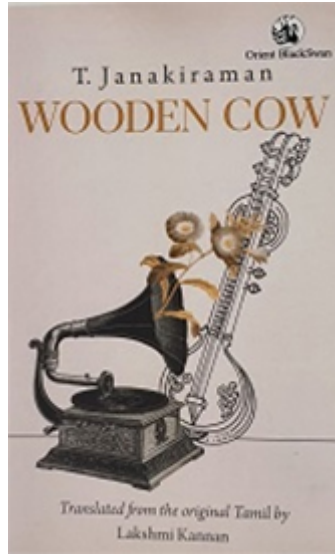


**'Wooden Cow' by T Janakiraman (Tamil), Trans. by Lakshmi Kannan  
Sudha Rai**



**Wooden Cow | Novel |**

**Tamil original: Marappasu by T Janakiraman |**

**Trans. by Lakshmi Kannan | Intro by Anita Balakrishnan |**

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## ***Hasya* and its many *Ragas***

Devoted chronicler of Tamil culture and visionary analyst of the weaknesses of a Brahmin orthodoxy and patriarchy, in the smaller towns of Tamil Nadu in post-independence India, T Janakiraman (popularly known as Thi Ja) gained recognition for the progressive thought in his novels and short stories. Recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award in 1979, Thi Ja's writings with their sharp portraiture of social types and individualized characters, delved into the grief and trauma experienced by the female sex, dwelling particularly on the harsh, inhuman treatment meted out to widows. Raising his concerns through the questioning voices of the major women protagonists in his first three novels – *Mogamul*, *Amma Vandhal*, and *Marappasu*, his narrative brilliance that blended realism with truthful and penetrating constructions of the inner psychological domain of his characters, resulted in bold social critiques that received a mixed reception from his readers. Within the genre of the realistic novel, it is interesting to observe Thi Ja's embedding of his leanings towards the genre of the psychological novel, drawing on constructs from modern psychological theory.

*Wooden Cow*, the English translation of Thi Ja's Tamil *Marappasu* is brought to a non-Tamil readership by the bi-lingual writer, poet, translator and critic Lakshmi Kannan in Thi Ja's birth centenary year. In her thought-provoking prefatory essay to *Wooden Cow*, "A Dappled Deer or a Growling Leopard," Kannan describes the challenges of translating the novel for a second time, stating: "I wrestled with a new kind of beast that is hard to describe and difficult to handle. It entailed managing the distance between the 'old' and the 'new,' each fighting for its space." The result is a translation for the contemporary reader felicitously fusing Thi Ja's narrative intent and craft, with Kannan's own linguistic expertise and insights into Tamil Brahmin culture.

Poetic descriptions of the town of Annavasal and its environs will resonate for many readers with Raja Rao's novel on village life, *Kanthapura*. The layers of this living culture can be seen in the continuity of an age-old musical tradition of Carnatic music, performed at the Shankara Jayanti and Arunagiri all-night festivals in open-air venues which the village multitudes throng. Marriage celebrations are solemnized to the overpowering music of the auspicious *nadaswaram*, and, when the setting of the novel moves to Madras, the mandatory idli-dosa-uppama breakfast accompanied by filter coffee, stamps homogenous ways of living. In such a culture, for girls, early marriages were the norm and education restricted. The novelist addresses other causes of social and cultural decline, such as infidelity in marriage, commercialization of the world of music and dance, and the hypocrisy and snobbery of the wealthy and powerful. Satirical portraits of social types compound the view of a society hardening through its own orthodoxy and materialism. Other explorations by Thi Ja in *Wooden Cow* open up an understanding of the culturally governed play of sexuality, masculine and female identity, dreams and their significance, and the complexities of identity and selfhood.

The first section of the two-part novel, poignantly draws out the young girl child Ammani's trauma after witnessing the enforced cruelty of widowhood rituals imposed by Kandu Sastri on his 18-year-old daughter. Revulsion towards the institution of marriage takes shape within Ammani and the novel delivers her diatribe against marriage for women in no uncertain terms, describing it as "a scorpion in our hands, mistaking it to be a butterfly." She is traumatized further by her experiences in school, when her humanitarian concern and expression of empathy for a male classmate is misread, and she is publicly shamed by insensitive peers. Through such episodes, Thi Ja traces early formulations of Ammani's vision of a gender desegregated society based on equality, and bound by love. Rejection emerges as a major chord in the first part of the novel, as an outspoken Ammani is disowned by her own parents.

Enthralled by the Carnatic vocalist Gopali's quality of voice, his virtuosity as a musician, and his near-deification by listeners she has seen from early childhood, the twenty-year-old Ammani, on her very first visit to Gopali more than twice her age, falls prey to his seductive intent. She first sees him seated on a swing, with one leg dangling. Deploying a subtle intertextuality, Thi Ja evokes the figure of Krishna, the enigmatic, adored Gopala of the Gopis. As the narrative progresses, Thi Ja inscribes the split in Ammani between her theoretical understanding of women's bondage, and her bodily surrender to Gopali, who sets her up in an independent house in Madras. It is Gopali's nephew Pattabhi, whose maternal 'solicitude' for her shapes for Ammani, their carefree relationship that grows beyond intimacy, but is eventually lost through her own doing.

Alongside this development, the plot details the rise of Ammani in the second part of the novel, as a trained and successful Bharatnatyam dancer performing abroad. She launches herself on a wild and reckless life, as if picking up her own ‘dare,’ succumbing to the temptation of multiple sexual relationships with men where she is feted and admired. Thi Ja portrays an Ammani who enjoys her transition to adulthood, engaging in serious intellectual conversations with her lovers about her own self and the world around.

Thi Ja uses three thematic ‘tropes’ to define Ammani’s identity. The entire narrative of *Wooden Cow* is punctuated by the trope of ‘laughter.’ Even as a young girl, she has a pronounced behavioral mannerism of indecorous laughter in public. Ammani often steers clear of the required socially expected emotions, thereby earning the wrath of her mother. “That was when I was a child. If you ask me it’s pretty much the same now. I feel like laughing not only at death or marriage but at everything,” she states. Ammani’s laughter is her instrument of survival and weapon of defense in a set-up inimical to her true nature. Thi Ja prods the reader to understand Ammani’s emotions of hurt, humiliation, anger and sorrow beneath a laughter socially constructed as abnormality or madness. Ammani asks of herself – “This compulsive laughter, does it imply that I have schizophrenia or some kind of mental illness? Maybe.” It is only her beloved Periamma’s laughter that is evaluated by Ammani as just what it is, and free of any kind of malicious intent.

Semiotic conventions of laughter differ from culture to culture, for men and women, and in varying contexts. Bharata Muni’s *Natyashastra* identifies three types of ‘*Hasya*’ (laughter) – ‘*Apahasita*,’ (silly laughter) ‘*Upahasita*’ (satirical laughter) and ‘*Atihasita*’ (excessive laughter). Ammani’s laughter falls not only into the third category of *Atihasita*, but manifests itself in different forms, most often as a non-verbal rejoinder to the cruelty and injustice she witnesses in the social sphere. As a woman, her incongruous, loud laughter clashes with the situational decorum. Another significant trope of ‘touch,’ characterizes Ammani’s mission, if a somewhat naive and idealistic one, to unify humanity through touching and hugging every ‘body’ she encounters: “But I want to touch everyone born in this world at least once,” Ammani cries out. Thi Ja appears here to be embedding a subtle counter-discourse and sub-text to the prevalent inhuman caste practices of untouchability. A third trope of the ‘mirror’ into which Ammani gazes, works as an instrument of self-reflection, validating her being, freeing her briefly from the social gaze that conveys disapproval and rejection. “My only laughter-free moments are those that I spend in front of the mirror,” she declares.

In Thi Ja’s empathetic response to framing ‘The Woman Question,’ contemporary readers are likely to be captivated by the discourses on ‘difference’ in a marriage and on sexuality, streaming from Ammani’s loquacious personality. Kannan’s translation glides the reader through the still, yet troubled waters of her unrelenting stream-of-consciousness and internal dialogues. Pegging down entry points into Ammani’s questioning, argumentative mind, and swirl of emotions, Thi Ja circulates the themes of marriage, widowhood, gendering of the girl child, sexual harassment of women, and the promise of a liberating Marxism.

It is in the small character sketches too, that Thi Ja reveals his skill as a novelist of social realism. The minor characters Periamma and Periappa stand out as humane individuals with their unequivocal commitment to providing a home for Ammani when her parents spurn her.

Periappa, a very Dickensian character, who is addicted to reading detective fiction bought from second-hand shops, is likely to remain etched in the reader's memory as: "He had a habit of winking at everything." The sub-plot on the theme of a happy marriage (bearing strong comparison with Shakespearean drama) unravels through the loyal servants of Gopali's household – Pachiappan, and his wife the innocent and attractive Maragatham.

The ending of *Wooden Cow* places before the reader the possibility that in choosing and willing to redesign afresh her own life, freeing herself from subjugated knowledge and experience, Ammani can begin reclaiming for herself, the pure and blameless laughter of childhood.

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