



Title: Wooden Cow

Author & Translator: T. Janakiraman, translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Kannan

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T. Janakiraman (1921-82), affectionately known as Thi Jaa, is an iconic, widely read and revered Tamil writer and one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century. Belonging to the Manikkodi movement in Tamil literature, which brought in new ways of writing, with an emphasis on the art of fiction as practiced by the Modernist writers in England, he wrote in a deliberately pared-down style and explored psychological ramifications. It is no coincidence that the hundredth year of his birth is being celebrated in 2021 in a great way. As a tribute to him, Orient Blackswan has just published a second edition of his Tamil novel *Marappasu* (*Wooden Cow*) aptly translated by Lakshmi Kannan, the well-known contemporary bilingual writer and poet. A novel quite controversial when it was written, it is basically the portrayal of a strong woman who lives by her own convictions, rejects the institution of marriage, and who remains true to herself, despite social censure. Narrated in the first person by the protagonist Ammani, it is through her consciousness that the events of the novel are reflected. Divided into two parts, the first section delineates Ammani's growth from a precocious child to a luminous, spirited young woman. She leaves her natal home for higher education to live with her Periappa and Periamma, her uncle and aunt, and starts living a non-traditional life.

The opening sentence of the novel, “Almost anything makes me laugh” vouches for her strange beliefs and behavior. Her headstrong nature coupled with her intolerance of injustice results in her being mired in controversy over and over again. She ‘hardened’ her mind as she “knew there is no meaning in marriage and all that sham in the name of respectability”. She doesn’t wish to steal but wishes to live on her own terms. She spouts communist philosophy and rails against the unjust treatment of the poor by the government. Though financially very poor, she goes and invites the famous singer and musician Gopali to perform at her cousin’s wedding celebrations. Soon Gopali’s charisma draws her into his ambit. He takes her to Madras and also arranges dance lessons for her and moves her into a house he buys for her. Ammani rejects marriage as a bourgeois concept but soon accepts her hedonistic new life and begins her unconventional and volatile relationship with Gopali.

In the second part of the novel, we see Ammani as a woman of the world, divested of all her connections with traditional Brahmin society. Wary of marriage, which she sees as a lifelong imprisonment, she travels around the world giving Bharatnatyam performances. Gradually her relationship with Gopali is strained when he realises that he is not her only male companion. Ammani’s many romantic entanglements provide her with a different view of the man-woman relationship. She gets into a relationship with a man called Pattabhi but laughs it off when he proposes marriage, thus wounding him deeply. Throughout the novel there are many more instances of her waywardness. She poses as a streetwalker in London and picks up a Vietnam war veteran called Bruce with whom she spends three weeks. Initially Bruce is convinced that he “got to know a rare human being”. He tells her, “You may have slept with three hundred people and kissed a few thousand. But you are a very pure woman”. But when he tries to be intimate with her, Ammani states: “I’m a public girl. At the same time, I’m also not public. I can be bought. But I’m also not for sale. It’s possible to stick to me, but it won’t last. Why are you looking at me as if I was an exhibit?”

She explains to him that she has no relations or friends. She drops each friend in their place and moves on. While on a train journey with Gopali, she makes a sardonic assertion that she is not Gopali’s wife and confuses the fellow English passengers travelling with them. Thus, far from adhering to the caste and class hierarchies and morality, the novelist portrays Ammani as a woman who lives by her own convictions and remains true to herself despite social censure. Towards the end of the story however she realises through the marital relationship between her servant Pachiappan and his wife Maragadham that a man and a woman can also be true soulmates, and this renews her faith in the institution of marriage.

The title is based on her perceptions when she sees a dead cow on the street one day. People were wary of the unpleasant task of having to dispose the carcass, even though

the cow had provided milk and had borne calves when she was alive. Metaphorically speaking, she perceives herself to be similar to the cow that lacks functionality, and therefore wooden. By disclaiming the institution of marriage, she has been merely a shining curio that has not been of any real value to others.

Translation and its problems are nothing unique and hence critics have even labelled it by terms like ‘transliteration’ and ‘transcreation.’ In [*Mouse or Rat? Translation As Negotiation*](#), Umberto Eco writes about a postlapsarian movement between different tongues, the perilous attempt to express concepts from one language into another. “Translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.” By suggesting that translation is a ‘negotiation’ not just between words but between cultures, whether it be a loss or a gain on either side, Eco emphasizes that a translator’s job is to decide what elements are vital and which may be neglected. In another instance, the problems of translation are put forward by Jhumpa Lahiri in her latest novel *Whereabouts* (which she self-translated from Italian to English) attests to the fact: “Translation shows me how to work with new words, how to experiment with new styles and forms, how to take greater risks, how to structure and layer my sentences in different ways.”

That Lakshmi Kannan decided to re-translate the original Tamil text once again after a gap of nearly forty years vouches for the fact that a translation can never be declared as one and final. What she did in the first edition in 1979 left her dissatisfied and as she herself declared, trying to do a fresh translation of an older piece of work was like wrestling with “a new kind of beast that is hard to describe and difficult to handle”.

By paying more attention to enhance readability for a contemporary audience as well as to preserve the Tamil flavor of the original by retaining many original words in the text and providing a glossary at the end, this revised version has emerged rejuvenated as a new text.

As Anita Balakrishnan rightly points out in her foreword, the author wrote in the distinctive Tamil dialect of the Kaveri delta that created a characteristic style. This made the task of translating even more daunting, for the carrying across of the nuances of the Thanjavur Brahmin register is no mean task. Also, Jankiraman’s technique of interweaving the mellifluous strains of Carnatic music with his pathbreaking themes helped him to ensure his place in the great tradition of modern Tamil fiction. With a good command of both English and Tamil, Kannan’s translation ably captures the nuances of the original text, and she should be congratulated for bringing the works of T. Janakiraman to a pan-Indian as well as global readership. Her unique attempt to re-translate the novel once again by rectifying all the lapses in the

earlier translation speaks of her sincerity, integrity and ultimately love for her mother tongue Tamil as well.

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