



# From the Pen of an Iconoclast

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**WOODEN COW** by T. Janakiraman. Translated from the original Tamil by Lakshmi Kannan. Introduction by Anita Balakrishnan Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2021, pp. 197, ₹575.00, , 197 pp., 575.00

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T. Janakiraman (1921–82), affectionately known as Thi Jaa, is one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century Tamil literature. He wrote about familial and interpersonal issues, with a focus on the ill-treatment of women, especially widows. His best-known novels, *Mohamul*, 1964, (*The Thorn of Desire*), *Amma Vantal*, 1966, (English translation *The Sins of Appu's Mother*) and *Marappasu*, 1975, (*Wooden Cow*) present strong women with a mind of their own. Bilingual novelist, short story writer, poet and translator Lakshmi Kannan had published an English translation of *Marappasu* in 1979. She felt the need to do a revised version; the birth centenary of the novelist provided the occasion to publish it.

The protagonist of *Wooden Cow* is Ammani, a spirited woman who flouts societal barriers of caste and class. The first section of the two-part novel has a chronological narrative, as Ammani describes her early life in Annavasal. The poetic descriptions of this village, with its Shankara Jayanti and Arunagirinathar festival, reminds one of Kanthapura in Raja Rao's eponymous novel. Temple festivals are occasions for Carnatic music performances. Every year Gopali, a gifted vocalist, much in demand in big cities, comes to Annavasal, his birth place, to sing at the Shankara Jayanti. Janakiraman captures the greatness of Gopali's music, which entrals everyone, including the child Ammani. Ammani is beautiful, and very good at studies. The village does not have classes above the fifth, so she is taken to her *Periappa's* house in Kumbakonam.

As a young child, Ammani is traumatized by witnessing the widowhood rituals inflicted by Kandu Sastri on his eighteen-year-old daughter, and develops a lifelong revulsion to the institution of marriage. Ammani's mother (but not Ammani) is very happy that the rich Kandu Sastri wants to make Ammani his daughter-in-law. Even as a twelve-year-old, Ammani can see through people's

pretensions: “A girl from a poor family, she has such a full face, nice chiselled features and a lively disposition. If we take her in as a daughter-in-law, we can keep looking at her. Make her a slave.” She, on her part would work herself to the bone, grateful for this rare generosity. You would also have another talking point then: “Money is not everything for us.” You could brag about your generosity’ (pp. 18-19).

Touch is very important for Ammani, she feels she can truly communicate with others only through touching them. She is very sensitive, and feels the pain of others. She feels sorry for a sick class-fellow, and rubs a balm on his forehead, but she is shamed by other boys, led by the cruel teacher she complained against. Her reputation is in tatters, and her parents want to marry her off hastily, but Ammani refuses to leave school, ‘I’m on a full scholarship and rank first in class’ (p. 19). Her *Periamma* (wife of her father’s elder brother) supports Ammani, ‘She is going to continue with her studies. You can consider that you have given her to me in adoption’ (p. 31). The parents disown Ammani.

Ammani invites Gopali to perform at the wedding of Periappa’s daughter. The highly paid artist agrees to perform free, to oblige the beautiful young woman. He offers to sponsor Ammani’s higher education in Madras. When he suggests that she learn dancing instead of singing, she gives up studying for an M.A., and moves to the house he has set up for her. Her *Periamma* and *Periappa* are shocked to find that she is now Gopali’s mistress; the first part ends with Ammani giving up her links with them.

The narrative in the second part goes back and forth in time, rather arbitrarily. Gopali gets his nephew Pattabhi, an eighteen-year-old student, to stay in the spare room in the house. Pattabhi looks after Ammani with great devotion; she is strongly attracted to him, she is just four years older than him, but laughs at his offer of marriage. She is drawn towards Maragadham, the girl her servant Pachiappan marries, and feels very protective towards her. When their hut collapses during a cyclone, she invites the couple to stay with her in her house. Pachiappan points out that the master (Gopali) would not approve, but Ammani does not believe in caste restrictions.

Ammani becomes a famous dancer, and tours the world giving performances, and sleeping with admirers in every country. In London, she masquerades as a whore, and picks up an American soldier, traumatized by his experiences in Vietnam. He starts questioning her aimless wandering, asking how her ‘instructive experiences’ would help her when she grows old. She thinks of a cow lying dead in the street; after giving milk all its life, it is now ignored. A wooden cow doesn’t give milk, it is ‘admired as a table top decoration’ (p. 186). Ammani realizes that she has avoided the messiness of family life, but has

become a decorative piece, like the unproductive wooden cow. Her life takes a new direction on her return to India.

An outstanding feature of the novel is Ammani's sensuous apprehension of life. Janakiraman captures the sights, sounds and smells of whatever Ammani sees. Here is a description of Periappa's house which overlooked the temple pond: 'There were so many noises. The calls of the women selling vegetables, the call of the kite, the screech of the herons, the calls of the water birds, the bells of the carts jingling towards the train station, the ceaseless squelch of clothes being washed. At sunset, the streetlights from the three sides would be elongated as the reflection floated on the waters. As one listened to the notes of the temple bells, ...'

(p. 18). And, 'Sunlight in the house in Madras has a life of its own: sunlight scattered in dots like the hide of a dappled deer. At other times, it growled like the hide of a leopard' (p. 58). When the doorbell rang, 'It was discordant with the chatter of the birds that was in harmony with the sunlight' (p. 59).

Janakiraman has striking images: to quote just one example, 'Gopali shrank back from her flattery as if a prickly caterpillar had crawled all over him' (p. 122).

The narrative has immediacy, as if Ammani is *talking* to us, the readers. As a little child, she remembers being unable to control her laughter when an uncle of hers died. 'That was when I was a child. If you ask me, it is pretty much the same now. I feel like laughing not only at death or marriage but at everything' (p. 4). By the end of the novel, we realize that laughter is Ammani's defence mechanism against the world. She mocks at hypocrisy of any kind, whether it is the silk sari clad Marxists who lecture people in the slums, or 'a man who flies to a khadi meeting in Delhi and talks with his eyes glued to my bosom' (p. 189).

The characters are built up through small details. In the first chapter, Ammani describes the enthralling beauty of Gopali's singing, but also recounts his comment when (years later) she tells him about a singer in Hungary who had a voice like his, 'Was she pretty? How old was she?' (p. 9). And the reader gets a hint of what to expect when Gopali sees the beautiful Maragadham. The novelist presents twenty-year-old Ammani's encounter with the forty-seven-year-old Gopali with great sensitivity. Gopali talks as if he remembers her from his visits to Annavasal, but Ammani realizes 'it was all a lie' (p. 44). 'He called me "child", but his arms weren't hugging me like I was one, though I couldn't say for sure. I edged away and looked up. The body and the eyes that had foolishly embraced me were no longer there. I could only see the sublime ecstasy with which he sang, obliterating all the people sitting in front of him' (p. 45).

The minor characters are well etched; Pachiappan and Maragadham with their steadfast devotion to each other represent the moral centre of the novel and make Ammani rethink about marriage. Ammani's mother is the typical orthodox villager, unable to understand Ammani's desire for education. Her Periamma and Periappa (he has studied only till the 6th class) support her when she wants to go to college, they love her more than her own parents. However, Ammani in the second part is not quite credible, with bizarre declarations like, 'I wish to live with all the men in the world like a wife, if only for a moment' (p. 135); 'Not only Maragadham. There were countless other girls too who lived within me...girls from all over the world were inside me. I experienced the orgasm and the pain on behalf of all of them' (p. 164).

*Wooden Cow* is a triumph of translation; Lakshmi Kannan captures the ambience of rural and urban Tamil Nadu without peppering the narrative with words from the original language. She uses Tamil words like *arasilai* and *dharbai* (with a glossary) only because there are no equivalents in English. Her eight-page note, 'A dappled deer or a growling leopard' discusses the problems of translation; her interaction with Janakiraman reveals the personal side of the writer. Anita Balakrishnan's introduction, 'The Cadence of Life', discusses the main themes of his work.

Janakiraman's delineation of a woman's sexuality fifty years ago won him the reputation of an iconoclast. His exposé of society's hypocrisy, pretensions and double standards is still very relevant. Characters like Maragadham, Periappa and Periamma are memorable.

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