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<tr>
<td>引用</td>
<td>長崎大学教養部紀要 人文科学篇 1989, 29(2), p.53-102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>発行日</td>
<td>1989-01</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15255">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15255</a></td>
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NAOSITE: 長崎大学学術研究成績リポジトリ
http://naosite.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp
JEAN ARASANAYAGAM’S “THE OUTSIDER”

By Le Roy Robinson

Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. She has won two National Awards for poetry and non-fiction. She is also a painter and designer who has exhibited her work.

She was born Jean Solomons in Kandy, Sri Lanka, of Dutch Burgher descent, and spent her childhood in a small provincial town called Kadugannawa.

In 1961 she married Thiagarajah Arasanayagam, who is also a writer and painter. They have twin daughters, both of whom are university students and are also writers and painters.

Jean Arasanayagam had her early education in a private Methodist missionary school. She graduated from the University of Ceylon, Colombo, where she majored in English, Latin and History. In 1964 she received a Diploma in Education from the University of Peradeniya. She also has an M. Litt. from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland.

She has taught English language and literature in a convent school in Kurunegala and at St. Anthony’s College, a private Catholic high school, Kalugateta. She has lectured at the Open University, at the University of Peradeniya’s Dumbara campus, and at the Kandy Polytechnical Institute. She presently lectures at the English Teachers’ College, Peradeniya.

“The Outsider” is being edited by Le Roy Robinson.

* * * * *

The Outsider

Stranger

And what were those ceremonies
whose esotericism I was denied
those seasonal festivals to the sun,
to light, to the cow with flowering horns?
those long night vigils
with the gods,
at dawn the milk bursting
into white flowers in early sunlight?
You needed a sacrifice;
in ancient times
you held a knife to the throat
of the young compliant animal.
Your mind renewed itself
in blood
to give vigor to your lineage.
You revive rituals
when they are no longer necessary.
Your hate was prestige
to your clanpride,
its white linen
stained with the guilt
of your acts.
When will you seek expiation?
You were the assailants.
I was not prepared for your hate.
The forest fell towards me.
The temple crashed in ruins.
On my tongue the thirtham
was bitter.
I built our pyre
out of fragrant wood,
flung your jewels into the sea.
You made me destroy
what you loved most.
Your youngest son stands
with the burning flames.
Soon your blind eyes
and charring bones
will crackle into ash
and its voice speak
in a faint
diminishing whisper.

***


"Whose fault?" asks her daughter-in-law.

"I don't know." Achchi shrugs. "It is the sons' duty to look after the mother. So many years Thiagarasa looked after. For big operation he sent me to India. Now it is Rasa's turn."

"But for twenty five years you did not look at him, his family."

"Pata did not like me to go anywhere. I never went to visit anybody. They must come to see me. Pata said 'You must stay here only'. People will respect only if you have money."

"You did not like me because I was not your kind."

"Maybe."

***


Ashes spilt out of the urn lay like a skin on the water, salt and ash sucked in by fish. Bounty and riches, caste, hierarchy, homage. They expected it.
got it. The Koviyars carry the bier in the village. Now the leaves pile up at the threshold. The pillars are cracking. Pettagams like empty coffins. The grove is a wilderness. The parakeets pillage the fruit. There are strangers in the house. The alari poo fallen from the branches curl up their yellow petals. The toddy pots swing on the palmyrah tree. Does the sound of bursting shells reach here? Cyanide lockets round their necks. Bridegrooms of death. Count the chains round their necks. Padakkams studded with diamonds and rubies.

* * * * *

Crows pecking at the putrid bodies. The crows grow sleek. They dance round with the blue-black clawed feet and grasp the hair heaped about untidily to reach the flesh. The crows are always hungry. They have not feasted like this before. Fish, meat. The crows had only the entrails of dead cats, huge bandicoot rats, maggoty flying foxes to pick at. The crows surround their own kind and peck at it raucously cawing. Its leg is broken. Merciful to kill it. What's the use of a crow with a broken leg? Soon the red ants will start crawling all over it.

* * * * *

Achchi takes the food from her plate which she has made into a ball and flings it to the crows hovering about in the garden. The stray dog slinks away. "No fish, no meat. Even the dog will not eat," says Achchi, a vegetarian. The crow flies down from the guava tree to eat the blessed rice she has prayed over.

* * * * *

Crows and dogs feed off the flesh of the putrefying corpses that lie unburied.

* * * * *

"Once upon a time there lived a marsh crow. He lived near a pool from which he got his food. It was near the city of Benares on the banks of the Ganges. During a long drought the city crow was starving. He saw how well the marsh crow and his wife were living. He decided that he and his wife would serve the marsh crow, so that they could share the food from the pool. The city crow grew tired of serving the marsh crow. He thought he could catch fish on
his own. He wanted to free himself from his bonds. The marsh crow knew that he
would come to grief. How could a city crow catch fish? The city crow would
not listen. He tried to catch fish on his own and got entangled in the weeds. He
choked to death."

* * * * *

Crows do not go hungry now. There is not enough grain for the humans, but
there is meat for the crows.

* * * * *

She should go back. Back to Navaly. To the North. Who will look after her?
Draw water from the well? There is no one there left to do all that. All her pro-
erty in Colombo lost. And she had property that stretched from Grandpass to
Cinnamon Gardens. Blocks, blocks, blocks of property. Lost. Enormous stret-
tches. Grandpass. Brassfounders Street. Cinnamon Gardens. Sold off by her guar-
dian.

* * * * *

"I will take mother and go and live in Jaffna," says Rajan, the eldest son.
"Who will draw water from the well?" asks Kumar, the youngest son.

* * * * *

The man with his back towards us stood at the well by the nelli tree,
bathing. He poured bucket after bucket of water on his body. Water. Bright.
shimmering light. Flowing towards the roots of the nelli tree. The air touched
with coolness. The coolness came through the heat and laved our bodies.

* * * * *

"I will take a small room and live with amma," says Rajan. "We will go to
Jaffna, to Navaly," Rajan says.

Achchi would lie fanning herself under the mango tree reading the
Sivapuranam. Lord Siva, the Destroyer and Creator.
Protection, promised in hand uplifted
His arms adorned with hooded serpents
a tiger skin His garment
the crescent moon in His hair,
His feet beautiful as the petal of the red lotus
and anklets sounding music as He dances
His face alight with divinest compassion
a third eye on His forehead
and throat blue as the light of the Sapphire
with the sign of poison
the sacred triple thread across His body
white with the radiance of smeared ashes.
While this white God hath His abode in thee,
O heart, what fear can assail thee?

* * * * *

His Family
I fight ragingly against the representations
of their society, their figures
etched on the skyline
huddling like crows with purple beaks
dipped in blood and carrion flesh
whom they must yet appease
with food blessed upon their plates.
Theirs is an empty society
torn up from weakening roots.
"Tradition," they tell me, "was strong once.
In our village, men stepped aside on roads
unwinding their shawls at our approach.
And wealth we had, elephants, palanquins, lands,
The banknotes taken from locked safes
rinsed out in light were laid out to dry
on mats spread out in the ul-muttham."
Golden sovereigns clinked, sifting through
jewelled fingers.
The koel’s cry was then auspicious
heralding the renewal of each birth cycle
after marriages were arranged
according to caste and horoscope.
Goat heads dripping blood from velvi rituals
brought into the kitchens, gash marks set like
reddest rubies in their necks, fingers
daubed with blood stains like kum-kumum
of Kali’s rituals, went into the simmering cooking pots.
He died young that grandfather, partaker of those banquets
Leaving a daughter sickened with so much voluptuousness.
Now ghosts ride the phantom palanquins
and the elephants long ago shed their ivory.
Two were left, set in carved ebony
probably sold by an exigent brother
or looted by the mobs.
They stood, then, at the head of Pata’s coffin
and he laid out in ivory silk draped
in shawl bordered with crimson and gold.
We, his daughters-in-law, had looted
the wealth of his loins; stood now
with our children scattering coins
on his wasted flesh.
In archives lie the sannasas of the past
cherished by history, guarded from silverfish
crumbling to the touch, disintegrating in our fingers
like buried skin, no one to decipher
an ancient script, only rumors, rumors
and recollections vague, fading of myths,
Tributes and Capture, gifts of grove and fields
where now the mines are laid
blasting hierarchy along their way
scattering in shreds each fleshly page.
The house recedes and the walls
delve down into their own burial
encountering emptiness.
They leave no heirs to defend this last inheritance.
Holed in within cracked tombs
hidden behind the sandbags and the battered walls
lie the sons of a different ancestry
bridegrooms of death
that await the final consummation.
There’s fire in the streets
for the agni worshippers.
They tread on ash.
No sacred yaham’s left.
For them, garlanded, three times circumambulate.
The bullets chant the vedas
and the bows of epic heroes
arc in the curving hand
of a flung grenade.
The sons of this family
do not ride the chariots to battle
in these new mythologies.

* * * * *

"I am not educated. I cannot speak English fluently. Words fall like stones
from my mouth. We are from Jaffna. We are godayas. We have to learn. We
say, ni, va, po." Achchi lies on my father’s armchair fanning herself and cat-
ching the green light in the milky opaque lake of her cataract eye. At six o’clock
she begins to close the windows. Insects come in. A big green wasp. A green
hop. Huge wings tissue the light and rustle-crushed paper in her gnarled hands.
A big green wasp striped with belly bands of color rapier antennae seeking her
out, she is being entombed within the walls of the wasp castle. Her bones scarce-
ly breathe through the numb flesh of her long sleep but she never talks of dreams.

* * * * *

"Appah was ill in bed for six months. We had to do everything for him. Wash him. Clean him." Achchi repeats the patterns of the ritual for her late husband.

Coffee at six o'clock.
Watching the time.
Shutting windows.
Putting on lights.
Putting off lights.

Achchi's tongue cuts like the sharp blade of the ariwarl. It can slice to the bone with its thrust. "I do not know English. Vengeance. Now you can take vengeance on me. God is there! god is there!" She thrusts her hands up in the air groping for god.

What have they done to her, her children? Six children.

"Why did you give your house to Sulochana? Now you have no place to live," says the daughter-in-law.


"Why did you give all your property away? All the jewels. The land. the house. The last thing you had. The last thing you owned."

"Rajan and Mohini brought her here one day. She did not know. They were selling off her furniture," said Savithri, Kumar's sister-in-law, the wife of Achchi's third son, the lawyer.

"But I thought all that had been destroyed when the mobs came and looted."

"What was left." Savithri tells us everything. "She was brought here by Lakshmi for a few days. She did not want to go back. I told my daughters not to talk to her. She said: 'Before I go I must tell you something. They told me that if I came to live here you will chase both mother and son away. I must tell you this before I die'."

"Yes, I told that. What else to say?"

"You can't trust her," Savithri says. "She is a big liar." She came here also
and says Rasathi, Rasathi to the granddaughters. "She is always like that. She pretends. I do not go there now, after she returned from your place. The other day she showed me my parents' photographs and told me to write the dates of their death behind. She pretends she does not know when they died. 'Did they die six months ago?' she asks. Ai, aiyo. I don't trust her."

"How to get married if you don't give dowry?" That is Achchi's belief. Lakshmi and Sulochana both had dowries of property and gold.

* * * * *

Wedding procession. All the pavada white cloths laid on the temple veedhi for the bride and groom to tread on. I, the daughter-in-law watched behind pillars. The nadhesweran players place their fingers on the silver instruments and the tassels swing about. The strident marriage ragas burst out.

* * * * *

"I must tell you," Rajan says. "I must tell you that I thought Mohini was going mad. She had a nervous breakdown. She used to scream. One day the neighbors came running. She screamed and screamed. I had to slap her. You won't believe me; her body was black and blue. She used to hit herself with her fists. Her brothers must have thought I was hitting her. I have never hit a woman in all my life."

"Why did they fight?" I, the daughter-in-law asked.

"Don't you know?" Rajan said. "Amma used to say all sorts of things." "Things. About what?" the daughter-in-law continued.

"You know. Caste and all that. She used to say that she was low caste. All kinds of insults. Nalavar."  

"But that was not true."

"Yes, that was not true. Just to insult."

* * * * *

"Achchi, you said these things about Mohini. Why did you insult Mohini? She is the wife of your eldest son. You admired her. All the privileges were for her. Then you insult her."
“Lies. Not true. All damn lies. Believe them. Believe, if you want. I am keeping my sons like this.” She bunches up her fist, tightly. “They only are great.” Achchi says with sarcasm. “How can I insult? They are Appah’s people also, no?”

“Always fighting when we were living together,” says Rajan.

Mohini mops the floor.

* * * * *

“I am sorry to tell you, but she never liked you. Pata liked you,” Rajan tells his sister-in-law.

“Achchi, Rajan says you never liked me.”

“That is why God has put me here. Now you can take vengeance.”

“I am a Christian. I am not like that. I won’t chase you away. You have nowhere to go,” I say.

“You can send me to my sister Bhahirathi’s. She told me to come. She will give me a room.”

* * * * *

Bahirathi has sold the house and gone away. The old house has been broken down. A new one has been built there. Bhahirathi is living with her daughter Shanthini. Grand wedding Shanthini had in Jaffna. Married a doctor. He came from Ireland to marry her. She came back within a year. Waiting for him to come and take her away. He had another wife there. Came back and had a conventional marriage. Went round the sacred yaham. Pointed to the star Arundathi. Constancy. The wives of the two Rishis. Arundathi was faithful. Akalikai was not pure and chaste. She was turned to stone. Place the foot on the grinding stone. Promise to be chaste. Point to the star Arundathi. Promise to be chaste. He never came back. Languished and languished. Years and years. “He will come back. He will come and take me.” In the end he never came. She married someone else. She has children now. Bhahirathi’s daughter Shanthini also had married a widower. He had daughters by the previous marriage.

* * * * *
"There is no room for you now in your sister's house. How can you go there? She lives with her married daughter Shanthini. Shanthini's husband won't want you there. And you with all your children. You must talk to us politely. Look, you have six children. They don't love you. Your daughters-in-law don't like you."

"Ask anyone in Colombu," Achchi says. "My name is Babo."  
She likes to think of herself as Babo. Childlike and innocent. Babo.

* * * * *

She is very curious about sex. Rajan is embarrassed. "When we were newly married, she used to come and tell Mohini all kinds of things. Mohini did not like her interfering."

* * * * *

Achchi says, "For four years I did not have children. We went on pilgrimages. I did Nagadosha at the temple in Rameshweram. Four males and two daughters."

* * * * *

Blood had gushed from her. Milk spurted from her breasts. Shrunken. Withered. Her tongue is wicked.

* * * * *

"My naaki kata. When you are old you become an old devil. Shiva. Shiva. Shiva." Sitting on the thotpai grass mat before the family shrine she arranged the incense sticks. Lights camphor. Puts holy ash on her forehead. She reads religious books.

"Babo. Everyone in Colombu calls me Babo. No one wants me. When you have no money no one respects you."

"Why is it that no one wants you?" asks the daughter-in-law. "It is not because of money."

"If you don't want, chase me away."

"You never liked me. Why? Because I am not your kind?"
“Maybe.”
Dishonest. Deception. Lies.
“Don’t lie, Achchi. Don’t tell lies.”
“I never tell lies.”

* * * * *

She must have led Pata a dance. Out and out bully. Strong. Dominates. No wonder the sons are emasculated. The wives are all stronger.

Fighter. Fighting cock.

“Oh, ho, ho! Oh, ho, ho! Kumar’s ladyship.” Achchi tightens, tightens her bony fist, clutches her knuckles, padlocks her fists. “You have him like this in your hands.”

“Jealous,” the daughter-in-law says. “You are jealous. Your son is mine. Never will be yours. He is mine. You have lost all your sons.”


* * * * *

The Swamis used to come. She would feed them.


“Achchi, you never gave me a glass of water,” the daughter-in-law says. “You never asked me to come for Pata’s almsgiving.”

Almsgiving. All the food cooked and served for everybody. Thinking of Pata. Austere. Always in white. She was jealous of him. He was tall and slender and fair skinned.

I dropped coins in his coffin.

Achchi sat on the verandah dandling the latest baby on her lap. She looked coldly at me. Tells the son, “Your sister is feeding the baby in the room.”

* * * * *

So she comes back here as a stranger and says, “It is now this son’s turn to look after me.”

* * * * *
She assails the walls of silence through the arrogance of her assumptions. And the others too. They felt they had rights over the lives of others because of their caste and lineage. Nothing should endanger the fortress, but their resistance was too weak, too puny. Breaches appeared in the walls. Cracks in the pillars.

* * * * *

Pata's walking stick crashed on the floor. He stood stock still in the center of the floor. Night-blind falcon, with his talons clutching silence. Helped back to his bed to lie and wait. Watching the spiders weave and weave the endless tapestries of the past on mindwalls.

* * * * *

So she came back as a stranger. And we could not even share a language. All the pictures of her children and grandchildren taken off the walls and packed in her suitcase.

* * * * *

The pattern of the kolam. The pattern of her life effaced on the threshold. Withered mango leaves, a wreath round the mouth of the pot. The paddy fields are all sold. Dowry for Sulochana. We can't go there now. The snake has crept out and encircled the grove. The rotting mangoes ooze the thick golden nectar from their split skins. A faint memory of the pattern remains. White patterns. The swans of the moon floating in black lakes. Black crows threading the branches. The vahanam of Saturn.

"Yogaswamy told me to feed the Kaka." The Kaka is the vahanam of Saturn. Carries her in the dream to the ancient temples.

At Kataragama Rajan had broken away from her arms and danced and danced till he fell in a faint. "Muruga. Muruga. Muruga!"

She cries in joy and terror.

Rajan says: "I can get gold, gold. I can harness the rivers to provide electricity for South India. There is aluminium in the soil."

Mohini says: "Rajan told me to get rid of it. Now I have pains in the side and
in my arm. I had an abortion.”

Muruga ! Muruga ! Muruga !

* * * * *

He has sold the back part of the land and taken the money.
Not his land.
“Your son has sold Sulochana’s land.”
“When he will go to prison.”

Muruga ! Muruga ! Muruga !

* * * * *

Rajan was a bully. One day Prem waited with a big pole to hit him. Pata spoilt him. Everything was for him. The first bicycle. The first trip abroad.

He was a bully. Hit us on the head. Screamed at us. Ate all the thick white almond icing on the cakes that Pata got as gifts at Christmas time from his business partners. Locked himself up in his room and ate and ate till he became green in the face. Green swelling through the skin flaking off like sugar crusting the lips with silver beads edifice of crenallated sugar flowers and leaves crumbling roses weeping on his lips.

* * * * *

“He told me to get rid of it.”

Tillakan is dead. Clusters of tumors growing in his brain. Grapes of blood. Stupefied by the wine of death.

“I want to go and join Skanda. I want to be with my son,” says Mohini.26

* * * * *

Those great and glorious legends of the past.


* * * * *

Bridegrooms of death. Cyanide carousing through their veins. To them their weapons are their wives. They spend the whole night polishing them. They’re strapped on to the trees. Snipers. Get a man a day.

* * * * *

“How to marry without dowry?”

An unmarried woman is inauspicious. She cannot take part in the rituals. Achchi was always there to bathe the bride. Six children. Fertile. Small body. Crooked hip, jutting out. Yet the poojas had paid off. The fecundity of the marriage bed. Her duty discharged. She begins to play her pre-ordained roles. Six children whom she beseeches the gods to give. Doesn’t matter what kind.

Bring them forth in the dark little room in the Naval house with the midwife in attendance. The doors are heavy, carved with flowers and leaves. In the courtyard the pomegranate trees and the pampered flowers watered by hand. The koel calls through the grove.

Her pre-ordained roles. She feeds them. Porrials simmer on the fires. Fish sizzle in the hot oil pans. She wears silk sarees. She goes to temple.

* * * * *

“Achchi, ask god to forgive your sins. You are now close to death.”

“Kethu! Kethu!” It is happening. Bad period.”

“You hate me,” the daughter-in-law says. “You always have. What is the use of your praying and reading your thevarams? You are living under our roof. You do not speak one word to any of us. If you speak, it ends in a big fight.”

“I never fight with anyone. Ask anyone in Colombu. They call me Babo. I cannot talk English properly.”

you. Why?"

"I don’t know. I never visited them."

"You don’t love anybody."

* * * * *

Achchi curves her hands, fondling, caressing her body.

"Fever. Kachal. I won’t bathe. Lakshmi will have to pay the doctor’s bills. I
do n’t care. Pour. Pour. Cold water. Never in all my life. Cold water. Come and
see. Come and see me bathing. Here, here. More, more. Put some more. Hot.
Hot water. Burning. Ha! Ha! Never in all my life."

Not true. Bathing is part of the traditional rituals of purification.

* * * * *

Oil bath in Navaly. Anno int the body with thick yellow gingelly oil. Seeps
and seeps through the pores. The body grows cool. Feels like an earthen ware
pot. Cool. Cool and smooth. Chiakka nut is ground and rubbed all over. Pots of
hot water heated for the bath. After that a big meal, and then sleep the hot
Purifactory rites.

* * * * *

Achchi is bathing the bride. Milk and water. To see whether there are
blemishes?

"One day I saw the bride-to-be was pregnant."

* * * * *

Beautiful like a lime fruit, the young virgins before they are betrothed.

* * * * *

"Come and see the crescent moon. Then we will be betrothed. If you have
already chosen, you refuse. The young crescent moon. Before its belly grows
full and fat."

* * * * *
"Take this down. Hindus must fast and pray. Then they will eat. Why, all these clothes are washed? Yesterday only all washed." Achchi does not want to take another saree out of the suitcase. She says: "Who will give?"

Insects drop out of the folds of her sarees. The green wasp flies in and out of her window.

* * * * *

We See Each Other

We see each other in our new nakedness
she now stripped of silk and gold
and I with merciless eyes
no longer blind to myths.
Her body that once was bathed in milk
laved with jewels—cold stones that
gathered heat from each her breasts
and sparked off fire before each brilliant
dulled and flickered to end its death
in fall of ashes.
Swathed in crimson readied for the bridal chamber at sixteen.

"The nautch girls came and put the flowers
in my hair, the jewels they adorned me with."
Her small body held much dower.
Her territories wide, her fields were rich.
Now juts a crooked hip out like disjointed wing.
Bright feathers with their youth and sheen
Plucked off to leave her body bare and chill.
Stripped quills that dipped in lineaged blood
once wrote their histories
in gestation of their kind.
Breeding willed, fertility a social rite,
and first denied, or so she thought, by gods
of children, she followed her society's decrees,
went on pilgrimages, poured milk upon the stone
and wrapped the garlands culled from her own prayers
about the Siva lingam piled round with fruit
and warmed with fire, to breathe desire and life
into her new lord’s limbs;
where love had not thought fit to shape her life
for procreation, beseeched all Kailasa’s deities
to make the seed spring fecund in her barren womb
and make a pooja of the act of consummation
emptying from her clasped hands offerings
of fulsome fruit and budding flower that spelt fertility.
Now drank the nectar of its juice
where earlier love had only left a better savor
now brought forth through her faith
both sons and daughters
made of love’s act, to please the gods
this new penance in guilt’s expiation.
Who knows what shaped her dream
of karmic birth? Her dead brother
to become re-incarnate as her progeny
found in those supernatural night journeyings
from another world wrapped in a groaning haze
of red and swirling dust, drawn, down,
down into the netted hammock
swinging on mind trees
into her psychied womb
from where she pushed him forth
impelled by that incestuous love
which gratified her groping search
creating flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood,
while yet another sprouted from the seed
just as she had let the other out.
Her fields were rich, ploughed by the gods
its earth now veined with gold;
the gods sent rains. No drought assailed
those harvests, the sheaves so richly garnered
filled her plenteous store with sound of grain
bursting with milky kernel.
She talked to gods,
prayed at her household shrine
lit lamps until her fingers burnt
like oil soaked wicks
that blazed their fire-licked brands
to light those pyres.
She stood afar and did not watch them burn
rubbed on her forehead ash whitening her brow
taken, until they emptied all their dust
from the urns of memory.

* * * * *

"How difficult it is for us to manage these days." Lakshmi sighs. "We have so many expenses. Mahes has bought another car for one and half lakhs. We have to pay income tax. Thousands of rupees. We had to give our estates over under the Land Acquisition Act."

* * * * *

They came all the way to Navaly to negotiate the terms of the marriage.
They sat, Pata and Achchi, in the pillared hall facing the ulmuththam, talking of the alliance.
The sisters had never spoken to any other men except for their father, brothers and close relatives.
Lakshmi could not live with her mother-in-law for long. Went and came back.
All the wealth came from the husband’s side: palatial mansions in Col-
ombo 7, Cinammon Gardens, Doresamy Gardens.

* * * * *

The house is full of period furniture. Indo-Portuguese, Dutch, Victorian. The liquor cabinet is full of whisky, sherry, beer, cognac. Portraits of illustrious relations on the walls.

* * * * *

We sit stiffly on a formal visit to see Achchi, who is temporarily at her daughter’s after July ’83.

We sip orange barley.

The two daughters-in-law of Lakshmi sit with their elegant legs crossed at the ankles, wearing western attire. Parisian haircuts.

Achchi sits stiffly, caught between the daughter and the grand daughter, Kumar’s daughter.

Nothing to say.

No one yet knows the secret—that she is a burden. She has a little room. The dressing room converted into a bedroom with a narrow bed and a chair.

* * * * *

Waste. The veena rotted, dust-covered in some hidden corner. The strings snapped, dangling and disintegrating. The voice of the bird grew hoarse from too much good living, rich food. Gall bladder had to be removed. Heart. Hypertension.

They never walked on crowded streets.

* * * * *

“Your brother says that you consider him the black sheep,” I say to my sister-in-law Lakshmi.

“Oh, he is imagining.”

* * * * *
On the next visit they ask "Where is Lakshmi?"
"She is holidaying with the daughter-in-law in America", brother-in-law Thiaganna says.

* * * * *

"Oh, Kumar, how difficult it is to manage these days. We have no money now. How can we keep Amma here? No room also. We will have to sleep in the hall if we give her our room. Don't send her back here. Our marriage will end in divorce. Let Rajan keep here. Thiagarajah won't have her."
"But Rajan says he sometimes doesn't know where the next meal is coming from."
"We will send all the food. Thiaganna will take the food. We have bought two tiffin carriers too."

* * * * *

"You are all flesh eaters," Achchi says. "I am vegetarian, no. You all can eat mutton, fish, chicken."
"Flesh eaters? We are not flesh eaters. Cannibals. You call us cannibals."
"Cannibals? I did not say flesh eaters."
We give her bread, butter, jam. Plantains.
"I won't eat plantains. Too cooling. I have cold." Achchi says. "What is this? What is this?" Touches. Licks with fingers. Moulds the food. "It will tie my throat. You want me to eat all? Mustn't waste, No?"
Now I eat every grain. I don't keep even a handful of rice for the kakas.

* * * * *

Alienation. They didn't mix. Only with those of their caste. Only the relations came and stayed there.
Pata was very fair skinned. He was sent to Jaffna to study. Stayed with his relations.
Another cousin also stayed. Very dark skinned. Pata was allowed to come through the front door.
They were westernized. Waltzed in the drawing room. Made raisin and
grape jam.
   Chamber pots carried out of bedrooms in the morning.

* * * * *

   “What did you do with it? The thali?” I asked Achchi.
   “Ate it.”
   “Ate gold?”
   “Sold and ate.”

* * * * *

Thrown out of her home.
That is now Sulochana’s house. She is in New Zealand.

* * * * *

“What do you feel about your mother?”
   “She ran the house.”

* * * * *

Isolated.
   “Achchi, you are enclosed in silence. Don’t you feel lonely?”
   “No, I look out of the window.”

* * * * *

On the bank the birds fly about pecking for food among the green ferns. A big green frog is splayed out above her head. Kumar brings a broom and flicks it off. Achchi notices nothing.

* * * * *

“Why don’t you speak one word to anyone?”
   “What is there to say?”
“At least you can speak to your son.”
“Appah also like that. I get the habit from him.”

* * * *

Life will never be ordered as it once was. Their marriages brought chaos to the household. The system was all wrong. Force children to do their duty. Duty without love. After twenty five years of alienation she comes back into the younger son’s life. But she does not know how to talk correctly. Her voice becomes rough and loud. Was there nothing to the contrary? That a Hindu lady should talk softly, in muted tones? She felt that she didn’t have to understand what she didn’t need to understand. Did she for a moment say “Will you accept me?” Or “Shall we accept each other? Shall we get to know each other?”

* * * *

I must address her as “Ningal”. Never to the contrary. Never “Ni”. She says “Ni” to her son. Respect and deference are due to her as an elder. Respect and deference is what she feels has always been her due. The traditional deference shown to caste, to birth and to inherited wealth. This could be used and exploited.

She can say “Ni” to me but I must always say “Ningal” to her.

* * * *

The daughter-in-law was always “she” or “that one”. “She told”. “That one told”. “I don’t talk to her. I never talk to her”.

“But you must talk to me,” I insist.

* * * *

How can I live under the same roof without talking to her? The gulf is there. We cannot hope to bridge it now. She has come too late into our lives. She utters lies. You cannot force us to accept the dishonesty of those utterances. We do not believe you. We know you lie easily. Your stepmother rubbed raw chillies into your mouth. Why? Raw red chillies ground into a red ball. Rubbed against the
silk of children’s lips and burning the tongue. Smarting! Smarting!

* * * * *

“We ate raw rice,” Achchi says. “We stole raw rice and ate.”
She loves sweets. Thick sugary preserves and honey. Licks her fingers. When the curries are even slightly hot, she makes sibilant sounds: su su su su su su...

Don’t you know what is happening in your country? You are concerned with the wrong things. All your life with the wrong things.

Look at the injustices you yourself have perpetrated. Look at the division of land in Navaly. The smallest piece and that reluctantly given to the youngest son because he married out of the family.

“I didn’t know about it,” Achchi says. “They did it. Pata did it.”

“It is mother’s decision,” wrote one of the other sons. “It is mother’s decision to give you this piece of land.”

It is the smallest in extent. The well is on the land of Thiagarajah. The eldest son has a share of what is left of the family house. The elder sister has the biggest portion.

At first they did not want to give Kumar anything.

“That fellow will sell it to any Nalavar,” Pata says.

The others hadn’t felt the slightest compunction about it.

* * * * *

I walked along an overgrown path. There were no boundaries to each separate domain. The thorny branches spread their tentacles all round. The louts pool was covered with rotting palmyrah nuts and dry fronds. The well? The water lay very deep and dark, too deep for me to skim off the green skin of time and peer into those hidden images, the drowned faces of the ancestors and the elephant god. A skim of dragonfly wings. Almost invisible in the light. The sun falls into the water. Burns up the skin of time. At night the frogs croaked till their distended bellies burst. And the toddy pots and the mangoes fell. The vembu flowers carpeted the floor. It was a haunted grove. The dry wood was piling up for the pyres. A lot of dry wood which no one collected to light the hearth.
They had no more use for this land or for the house. The palanquin had rotted somewhere in a corner of the verandah. All the photographs had been taken down from the walls. Soon it would disintegrate or be taken down brick by brick, tile by tile, the beams and rafters, the speckled pillars, the carved doors.

The house had many owners now. The heir who had the most money could buy it. Thiagarajah had sent most of the furniture for safe keeping to the Brahmin’s house. The dressing table with the clouded mirrors and the many drawers. The bed with the inlaid pattern of birds and flowers. Locked pettagams. Tables. Chairs. Small rooms.

Achchi had given birth to those six children in those small closed rooms, attended by a midwife. She had to beseech the gods to give her her first born. Pilgrimages to temples. Special poojas.

* * * * *

A man with his back towards me stood at the well by the nelli tree, bathing. He poured bucket after bucket of water on his body. Tributaries spread and sparkled on his skin. The water flowed to the roots of the nelli tree. The roots sucked it up. Nelli fruit sweet bitter quenched thirst.

* * * * *

There was no clear path through the wilderness. A tangle of thorns covered each portion of land.

Where was my husband’s portion? His last link with his childhood and the past.

It didn’t matter any longer that it was the smallest piece. That it was the smallest piece was the most significant.

Power and prestige no longer depends on the extent of the territory.

The land was now a symbol of arbitrary judgments and values of a family. As long as the system held, as long as that hierarchical unity existed, they felt that the family could be preserved for generation after generation.

But the roots were no longer there.

All they could repeat were myths and legends.

And they were preserved by a stranger.

* * * * *
Ancestors who rode to the court of Nallur to annoint the kings. Their fingers dripped with oil while the golden sovereigns slipped off their hands.

* * * * *

In the wide garden Pathmanathan pointed to a tree by the fence.  
"Look at that vembu tree. It has been stripped of its bark. Raped. Raped." He spoke vehemently. "See what they have done to it. These people will not leave even a tree alone."

* * * * *

I walked slowly round the house. White ant mazes crept up the side of the wall. The plaster was peeling. The earth of the grove hardened by time and sun. In the sand partly buried lay a mutilated stone elephant. Two of the elephants had once adorned the parapet walls at the entrance to the grove in which the house, lay. The elephants were missing. The gates were unlocked. Pata used to drive out of these gates in his horse carriage to take the train back to Colombo. Now any intruder could walk in. I was one of them.  
Paddy fields sold. Pettagams empty of grain. In the ulmuttham the bank notes laid out to dry on mats.  
Sovereigns cast before the nautch girls.  
Great goat heads dripping with blood. Banquests and feasts.  
The tethered black goats leap and twist in spasms as the knife blade severs the thick throat muscles and the blood-spurting veins. Velvi. Rituals and the blood splashed all over the stone.

* * * * *

They drag their wounded into the jungle. The smooth glass blood reflects sharp knife blades of light.  
The rituals go on and on.  
You go, you identify the dead. Recognize a son, a husband, a father, and then come away.
Thangeswary took me back to Navaly, to Kumar’s old home. Thangeswary was among the Bhajanai singers on the road to Nallur singing thevarams and dancing all the way from Navaly to Nallue. The Bhakthi singers clapped their hands and clashed their cymbals as they sang thevarams. In a trance. Eyes closed. Heads slanting back drinking the god wind that blew their bodies along the veedhi of Kandaswamy kovil.

A guerilla sits atop the gopuram with his AK 47.
This is the new Kailasa.

* * * * *

A woman drifts past. She sees only the gods. An old man kept the thalam following the nadhesweran players. The chapparam glittered on the plain.* The great carved ther was drawn along by a throng of human hands. The gods trembled with each lurch and their necklaces were flung about their breasts.

* * * * *

“He married an outsider, Pata’s brother,” said Achchi.

“An outsider like myself?” I say.

“An outsider. Not the same caste. Not the same religion. An Indian woman.”

“A woman? Not a lady?”

“A woman. Respectable.”

* * * * *

Some woman he had picked up. These women, the traditional wives, were kept in the house to maintain the system, to have children, keep the family intact.

* * * * *

“He stayed with us. He had a room in our house.” Achchi continued.

“An outsider like myself?” I said: “Why, Prem also married a European lady. “Who is an outsider?”

“She was not one of our people. Not our kind. Pappy and Company. He went
to work there."

"What was Pata like? Did you have a mother-in-law?" I wanted to know everything. All the knowledge I had been denied. For too long.

"Pata's mother died when he was two or three years old. His grandmother lived."

Achchi was in a talkative mood. She sifted about among her memories.

The stepmother was only a few years older than Achchi. Young. Fair complexioned. Beautiful with long hair that swept down her waist.

Achchi reminisced: "Ha. Pata's brother had tuberculosis. He would call Lakshmi, who was then only a child, and tell her to drink from his cup. I married at sixteen. I did not have children for four years."

* * * *

Thiagarajah talks of his ancestors to his nieces:

"One of your ancestors was a Vanniyar and in the rebellion during the period when the Dutch were ruling Ceylon. When the Vanniyar chieftains were defeated, he was brought in chains before the Dutch governor. The chiefs were ordered to pay tribute in elephant tusks and arecanuts. Your paternal grandfather too was taken in chains during the 1848 rebellion to Colombo. That was during the British period. He was one of the contractors of the Colombo-Kandy road. The chiefs were ordered to pay tribute in elephant tusks and arecanuts."

* * * *

"Elephants were hunted in Matara from May to September, and the vidanes of the kuruve or the elephant department had to deliver to the Company thirty elephants and nine tusks on behalf of those who held the kuruve villages. The Vanniyars paid as tribute thirty elephants a year and the company, moreover, held hunts of its own in the vanni and received elephants from Batticaloa and Trincomallee. These were sold either in Galle or Jaffna to traders from South India. The proceeds of the sales were sheer gain, and the Company realized on an average two hundred thousand guilders a year from the sale of elephants."

* * * *
“The collection of eighty elephants a year as tribute from the Vanniyars was matter of great difficulty. The Vanniyars had many grievances against the Company and once they had recourse to the King of Kandy and offered to place themselves under his subjection. The King was then very anxious to please the Company in order to obtain the opening of the ports and therefore sent the Vanniyars in chains to be dealt with by the Dutch. The Company later on resorted to the expedient of obliging one of the Vanniyars to live in Jaffna under guard, each for a fixed time, as a hostage for the good behavior of others.”

* * * * *

Locked in their genealogies.

* * * * *

Pilgrimages to Kataragama. Travelling in bullock carts for hundreds of miles. The pot of rice is set on a thick log to boil in the jungle. The heat awakens the huge python under which the simmering pot was set.

Thai Pongal. The pot is set on the fire decorated with mango leaves.

Saravanamuttu put the first handful of rice into the pot. The milk bubbles and spills over as they do their Suryahamaskara. Prosperity, Abundance. Plenty.

* * * * *

The sadham pot is now the burial urn filled with ashes. Thrown into the ocean.

* * * * *

“I blame your father. He is really to blame for what has happened to your mother. Left without a home of her own. Nobody wants her. She is now a burden to everyone. They are all waiting for her to die.”

* * * * *

Her hair is white. She has a broad forehead. No more pottu on her forehead or kumkumum in the parting of her hair. Widowed. Not even the holy ash of penance. Sometimes she prays. She no longer reads her book of thevaram.
When she is in a quarrelsome mood she blames everything on the planets. "Kethu. Kethu. Bad period. Four months only."

Her cataract veiled eyes press like milky blue opals and moonstone into her sockets. Her thin lips press into stubbornness and jut out in pique. A big head that is out of proportion to her small body. Straight long arms with large hands, strong fingers. Her shoulders stoop. One hip just out, a disjointed wing. Her legs are bowed. Her face is sometimes plaintive, youthful.

* * * * *

She stands at the door of the young grand-daughters' bedroom as they get ready to go out to a party, clothes strewn all over the bed and flung on the backs of chairs. Perfume tossed on their bodies smelling of fruit and flowers and peering into mirrors to place eye-shadow on their lids.

Her expression is child-like. Babo had readied brides for their consorts. So many of them. What other role was there for her to play in her life? Mother of six children, with a prosperous womb that showered the gold of progeny so she was the auspicious symbol.

* * * * *

Achchi scoffs at me, the daughter-in-law. "Ha! Fine time I have here. Carpets there are in my daughter's bedroom. Everyday Rahman the servant comes to clean the bathroom. Big mirror there is. Colored holders for the tooth brushes."

She keeps her dentures inside her suitcase. Hoards everything. Folds, refolds her few sarees.

* * * * *

"Achchi, are these all the clothes you have left?"
"There was a burglary in Colombo. Fourteen sarees stolen."
She has not possessed so many sarees for a long time.

* * * * *

Apportions out the jewels. "This attiyal I will give to your wife," she tells
Kumar. The attiyal is never given.

The daughters take it. They take all her jewels. Each one inherits what belongs to another. Their lives are based on this inheritance. They walk into houses already built by ancestors. Use furniture which has been purchased by others. Ready made histories. They do not leave the stamp of their uniqueness on anything. As the money dwindles so does their power. The uprooted people. The ghostly palanquins move in the grove while outside the armored tanks and artillery move along the roads. The koviyars are no longer there to carry their biers.

* * * * *

A guerrilla moves through the throng with his rifle held high. This is the new trident of Siva.

* * * * *

They do not worship the gods of war. The bunkers are not for them. The walls of their mansions are impregnable. So far.

* * * * *

I stepped beside one of the closed windows of the Navaly house. A stone elephant lay buried in the sand. I felt an urge to take it back to Kumar. The myth of the past. A reminder of the myths of the past.

* * * * *

Now putrefying bodies lie abandoned. Unclaimed. No one to perform the rites of death. No one to bury them. The invading armies move along these roads, capturing territory inch by inch. The choppers fly overhead, sweep down, spray bullets from the air.

* * * * *

The elephant god, Pillayar: Ganesh. Stood for wisdom. Not for a long time
now had the family performed their poojas to Pillayar.

* * * * *

In the garden, my brother-in-law Thiagarajah said: “Why, you will still find the rusted links of the elephant chains. The scars of the chains on the trunks of the trees. Everything is written down in the thombos. The palanquin too is mentioned.”

* * * * *

Lineage that is buried in the archives.

* * * * *

The smell of hot ghee and frying seeni pannyarams. Preparing for the wedding feast.

The old women for generations have been used to preparing sweetmeats for weddings.

They are molding the sugar syrup and flour. Stings of turmeric yellow murukku stream into the hot oil from the mold sizzling and puffing out.

Ah, the best ghee. You can smell the milk and fat and oil in it. You can smell it from one end of the house to the other. White thick ghee froths in the hot fire-fed pans.

Upstairs there is a room with the courtship swing.

There are brass chembus in the cool bathroom. A big copper pot holds the cold water, cool against the body as we pour chembu after chembu of water.

In the shrine Shakthi’s father is saying his prayers at the altar. The prayer rituals go on for hours and hours.

* * * * *

The smell of hot ghee fills the house. The sweet smell of pannyaram doused in sugar syrup.

* * * * *

The store room door is open. There are gunny sacks full of rice breached
open and spilling over.

* * * * *

In the morning we observe viridam, fasting, before we set out for Nallur Kandaswamy kovil.

At the entrance to Nallur the soldiers in green uniforms fill the trucks. Guns in hand, they look watchfully around. The young girls in silk sarees walk past them as if they do not see them.

A soldier gets off the truck and plays with a child. They are all very young soldiers. They are silent as they watch the procession stream past them. Nobody talks to them. They do not share a language.

* * * * *

Fresh white hand-threaded jasmines fall against braided hair. Rose clusters tucked behind the ears.

The sun is not yet up. The sky is clear.

* * * * *

I am in the house of friends and strangers. It is the wedding of Shakthi’s sister. The drums and the nadhesweran players announce the commencement of the wedding ceremonies.

Here I had met Thangeswary, the daughter of Ramachandran master from the village of Navaly.

Every Friday Kumar went to sing Bhajanai at the Pillayar kovil many years before.

* * * * *

“You are Babo aththe’s daughter-in-law? When I was a small girl, Babo aththe always brought me an apple when she came to Nvaly from Colombo. She would come and see me and give me an apple.”

* * * * *
The gifts she brought at my children’s birth were the traditional gold bangles. Taking them out of the velvet covered box, she clasped the fine thin gold circlets round the baby wrists. She looked at me as I lay prone with my stitched up stomach. “I have come only to see whether my son is happy.”

* * * * *

What happiness did she give her son?

* * * * *

“What do you remember about your mother?”

“She ran the house. When I was a small boy, one day her sister Bhahirathi and she were burning sago to make pottu. Thick black burnt sago.”

“Come and taste!” both sisters called out. Put it on his tongue. “Thu!” He spat it out. “Bitter.” They laughed together, the two sisters.

Rajan bullied her and made her cry. Pata always took the eldest son’s side.

Fanning her, fanning her, as she lay under the mango tree, reading the Sivapuranam.

* * * * *

I lurked behind the pillars. A stranger and an outsider at the younger sister’s wedding.

Kumar’s family came, alighting from their cars with a flourish of nadhesweran and a thudding of drums, stepping out on white pavada.

“Why are you standing here?” asked Rajasekeram, Bhahirathi’s husband.

“You should join the wedding procession.”

The bride goes round the sacred yaham. Jasmines in her hair. Gold lace on her green velvet jacket. Scarlet silk embellished with gold jari. Padakkams and attiyal and gold bangles, anklets and toe-rings. Jewels spilling out of their mother’s casket.

* * * * *

The paddy fields sold. The ancestral house written in her name. The eldest brother has brought her a suite of drawing room furniture.
At last she is married.

* * * * *

The eldest daughter’s wedding was a grand occasion. The biggest wedding in Colombo. The chief of the South East Asian Command was present. And all the ministers of the cabinet. The Colonial era. The police band played waltzes for the reception. But for the traditional marriage rites they had the nadhesweran and thavil drum. Tents were erected in the garden. The thali ceremony took place at the auspicious hour.

* * * * *

Now she calls her husband “appah”. He is soft and pampered. All his life he has walked on carpets, driven in cars, sailed in ships, flown in planes. He does not visit poor relations.

Once long ago they came with some measures of rice and twenty chocolates. After that the visits came to an end.

* * * * *

After 1983 Achchi was taken to the daughter’s house for asylum. The mobs had come and broke up the house and looted. No one to rescue Achchi. Old and forgotten. Lying like one of her ancient folded silk sarees in the almirah.

The grandson’s wife in the big house opposite was too busy packing up her jewels before they fled.

Rajan and Mohini were trying to save some of their goods—hundreds of sarees, 500 of them, jewellery, furniture.

Achchi was taken away in a friend’s car.

* * * * *

Achchi now lived in a small narrow room with a bed and a chair.

“Beggar. Beggar. That is what I am.”

“Don’t talk to that one,” says Lakshmi. “Leave her alone.”

She sings bawdy songs and quarrels with her daughter and the servants. She comes to our house.
Her pride is humbled.
“They will chase her away in six weeks,” a family friend says.
She delivers her portentous comments. “They said first you must ask permission of lady of the house. That is not Kumar’s house. That is the wife’s house.”
And sometimes she would say: “Pure of heart. Pure of heart. Not to praise. But I never saw anyone like that in the family. Pure of heart. My daughter Lakshmi, she is very shallow.”

* * * * *

Achchi sat in one of her old silk sarees with holy ash on her forehead as moveless as Pata, who lay in his coffin. A coffin flounced with satin overspilling frills. Cold satin. Cold ivory flesh.
The grandchildren stood nearby with lighted joss sticks in their hands. There was no smell of death or decay. Fragrant smoke wreathed round his head.
In Achchi’s long earlobes sparkled the clusters of rubies and brilliants. Heavy with gold.
Rubies. Bright pomegranate seeds embedded in the yellow brown skin.

* * * * *

In the Navaly house only a single gnarled and withered pomegranate tree remained in the sand-filled ul-muththam.
They had gone away from Navaly a long time ago.

* * * * *

Her favorite brother, her only brother, had died many years before. She and her cousin Uma, who longed for sons, had loved him greatly.
“I want to stay with my Akka. I don’t want to get married,” he would say when proposals were brought to him.
He was twenty-eight years old when he died. He caught the fever from his sister. He would sit by her and tend her. She recovered. He died.

* * * * *

One of the wealthiest business men in Colombo had wanted his daughter to
marry Somasunderam.

"I will get him a good job. I will make him the director of all my firms. I will do everything for him. Only persuade him," he told Pata, "only persuade him to marry my daughter."

"There is still time, time, time. I want to live with my Akka. I don't want to marry yet."

* * * * *

In the Navalı house they had peeped through the crevices in the door. Their father is dying. The young stepmother's relations are taking off the earrings. They are rifling through his iron safe. Going through his papers, counting out the banknotes. The golden sovereigns. The jewelry.

* * * * *


Pata had bought him a small car, an Austin, in which he drove about.

After his death, Akka and Uma could not be consoled. They wept for long hours. They both dreamed about him. Shared dreams. As if they had one sleep in one bed on one pillow.

* * * * *

Akka and Uma found themselves in a world that was burningly hot. Red clouds floated about their heads. Akka's and Uma's gold thalis glittered like gold snakes twisting about their necks in the heat. They moved in a red haze. All about them beings worked unendingly, laboring on and on. Wet bodies. Sweating out in their labor. They bent low. Stooped bodies, they lifted, they carried unseen burdens which weighed them down. They groaned and suffered from some unendurable weight.

Thambi spoke to them in these dream. His tones were sorrowful. "When you weep you make me suffer more. Don't call me back again and again. Relinquish me. Don't cry and shed so many tears. You call me and I cannot rest. We
beings must go through a period of purgation before we go to another life.”

Akka and Uma pester him with prayers and weeping. They both dream of him one night.

He is suspended from the branch of a tree wrapped up in a net.

“To whom shall I come?” he cries out to the two women. Uma pleads: “Aiyo Thamby, come to me!” Thamby laughs: “No, no. I will come to Akka.”

*****

She finds she is pregnant soon afterwards. Prem is born. Child of her incestuous passions.

*****

Prem visits home after twenty-five years. He does not bring his family. “They will suffer from culture shock,” he says.

Sits cross-legged on the chair. Eats his food with relish. Rice and hot curries. He is made much of when he returns. There is a big family party in Lakshmi’s house. She does not invite Kumar and his family. He shows slides of his English wife and family in their English garden. His accent is strange, a mixture of the oriental with the Manchester dialect. “Luv,” he says to everyone. “Coom on, luv.”

On the last night he paces the verandah. Hears the gate creak.

The family talks of Yogaswamy. They hear footsteps. “I am like a caged animal,” he says as he paces up and down.

Prem tells of his holidays in Wales. “I get up early in the morning and go down into the kitchen to make the tea. If there are cockroaches scuttling about, I kill them.”

“Fifteen pounds she spent at the hairdresser’s for our son’s birthday party.” Everybody makes a big fuss of him with parties and dinners. We all go for a wedding of one of the relations.

“That is Kumar’s wife,” Lakshmi says. Casually. She does not introduce me. All these people remain forever strangers.

must take your slippers and place them on my head. Yes, yes. Even Satan can become God. Chase me away.”

“We do not want to chase you away. Listen. Listen. You never listen. Each time we speak to you, you speak louder. You drown our voices. Listen. For once in your life, listen.”

“Money. Money. It is money. If you have money, you will have respect. Otherwise no one respects you.”

* * * *

Respect. The portrait of her parents turned to the wall. She does not want to look upon their faces anymore. she does not want them to look down upon her.

The father seated in a heavily carved, throne-like chair. Earrings covering the entire ear lobe. Legs crossed to show the tips of polished shoes. Clenched fists beringed. Spotless white clothes. Twirling mustaches.

The wife swathed in yards and yards of heavy Indian silk bordered with gold. From the throat to the waist the inherited jewels that weighed down the flesh. Attiyal, necklaces, four of them at least, encircling her short fat neck, padakkam pendants of varying sizes studded with brilliants and pearls, a nose-ring embedded in her nostril, heavy bracelets of gold on her plump wrist, a white handkerchief, no doubt of the finest white linen, bunched up in her hand with its many rings.

One of her hands rested on the back of the chair in which her husband sat. She claimed him in her stance. There were no smiles on either of those faces. Only the pride and dignity in the enclave of their marriage.

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Achchi’s photograph with Pata. The same silk saree, the attiyal, the padakkam, the bracelets, the rings, the handkerchief in her hand. She is standing beside Pata. But a Pata different from either his own father or his father-in-law. Tall, fair-complexioned, elegant yet austere. He wore no jewelry although his ears too were pierced.

* * * *
Achchi as a young girl had first seen him at Collumbuturai. She had come with her relations from Colombo by boat. Her young cousin Saravanamuttu stood at the quay waiting to meet them. He was sixteen years older than Thayalnayaki, his cousin.

"This is the man I must marry someday."

Besides the fact that they were cousins, their houses stood on the same land in the village of Navaly.

Thayalnayaki had all the wealth, much more than Pata, who was an orphan at an early age.

Her father and her maternal grandfather had owned ships which sailed between Ceylon and India. Her mother owned immense tracts of property in Colombo. The deeds of the Colombo house, the last bit of property she owned in Colombo, were traced back to Dutch times.

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Pata had imported textiles from Manchester. They had two cars, chauffeur-driven, servants to wait on all of them, money, shops, land. Expensive gifts were sent during Thai-Pongal and Deepavali, the festival of light, from the big shops that dealt with Saravanamuttu.

Pata had been a scrupulously honest man, and, during the Second World War, when there had been much profiteering, pilfering and dealing with the black market, he had refused to make money by any other means than the most honest.

Men who had started life from the very bottom, trundling open carts in the streets with their goods, had ended up as business tycoons owning shops stacked up with piles of goods. They now lived in palatial houses.

Saravanamuttu had helped their business because they had stocked all his expensive imported silks, tweeds, woolens and cottons. He had taken only a small percentage of profit even during those war years when the convoys of merchant ships had to make hazardous journeys with mines and submarines. But all this was soon forgotten. The merchants waxed richer and richer. Soon they began to export their wares abroad.
Saravanamuttu spent hours in little rooms, sitting cross-legged among the merchants on their thick carpets. Sipping tea from cracked cups while the business was being transacted. He had immense patience. He waited for hours on end in the stuffy little backrooms behind the shops in the Pettah and Port until the merchants would turn their attention to him.

* * * * *

A certain Rishi had come from India. A big function had been arranged for him by the son of one of the owners of the big firm which Pata had helped to grow wealthy.

Lakshmi and Achchi had gone to the function. The son had drawn Lakshmi forward to greet the Rishi, but Achchi had been ignored. She had to stand further back among the crowds. Pride humbled.

Yet in the past she too had shown arrogance. She had refused to attend the wedding of a young relation. "Why should I go? Whom did she marry? He is a Colombo Chetty." 45

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What are the rituals left in her life now? Her parched womb is arid. She wraps herself and sleeps, a bit of lean meat wrapped round her bones. No one clings to her for warmth. Yet her tongue is like a live coal, not yet ash. She never sheds a single tear.

"I admire her. That is her pride," the young granddaughter says.

Even at Pata's death, sitting by his coffin, she never shed a single tear. She has her freedom at last.

* * * * *

Pathmanathan had left his own property in the village and come here to live in this house that was falling apart.

"Where is your house?" I asked. I knew it was unusual for a man to live on another's property when he has his own ancestral lands.

"It is quite close by. But I don't want to live there because of the enmity between my brother and myself. When I get up in the morning I am forced to look
in the direction of his house. I might even get a glimpse of his face. I want to be as far as possible away from him. That is why I have come to live here with my family. Your brother-in-law has told me that I can live here.”

Pathmanathan’s young wife came forward carrying the youngest child on her hip. She looked much younger than her husband.

“I married late in life,” he said.

“What has brought you back to the village?” I asked.

“I worked in various places in Colombo. I was also at the Y.M.C.A. I always was a bit of a rolling stone. Now I have decided to come back and live here.”

* * * * *

Would we ever be able to come back and live here? My husband’s portion of land was indistinguishable from the rest. There were yet no boundaries, no fences. One day we would clear it and build a house of clay of Naval with a wide thinnai and an ul-mutham.

* * * * *

Savithri’s father had come back to Naval to complete the building of his daughter’s house. He died before the roof had been completed.

“I cannot forgive myself,” Savithri says. “When I was escaping from the mobs who came to destroy the house I had to scale the wall. My father climbed the ladder and jumped down on the other side. How could I jump? It was too high. He stood against the wall and I placed my feet on his shoulders. I can never forget that episode.”

Savithri said: “I sent him to die. I cannot forgive myself. He just walked out of the house and I never saw him again. I had to place my feet on his shoulders when we were escaping from the mobs. We had to run away. They shattered the glass, burnt up all our things, looted the sarees. Fortunately, there was a ladder against the wall. We climbed up. But how to get down on the other side? I placed my feet on my father’s shoulders to get down. I cannot forget.”

She repeats herself over and over again.

* * * * *
I still kept looking at the wilderness but I could see no way of going through
the tangle of bushes and thorny thickets. Dry palmyrah fronds and leaves lay on
the earth. Everything was desolate, overgrown, untended. The mango trees
were hidden in the thicket. The pannankaham flitted through the trees and the
parakeets swooped among the branches.

Looking at the abandoned desolate land I said to Pathmanathan standing
silently beside me, “I must tell my husband to come and clear his portion of the
land of all these weeds and bushes. Perhaps one day if we have no other place to
go we can come here.”

“That’s what they all say,” Pathmanathan said. “They come. They look
around. They point to the land they own. They say that is mine, the boundaries
stretch up to there, we will come soon, we will build a house here, but they
never return. The other day some relation of your husband’s came here driving
his car with some lady. She was not his wife. He looked around, pointed out his
property and said he must come and build a house here. They never return.”

“No. One day we will come.”

But as I uttered these words I felt a sense of guilt. I didn’t belong here. I was
an outsider. Even the portion of land that belonged to my husband was the
smallest.

When I last came here, Kandian’s mother had asked for a piece of the land.
“My grand daughter has to get married. Please give us a piece of land.”

Kandian and Sinnian, who did hereditary service for the family, and cut the
palmyrah flower to collect the toddy. Sinnian would capture the parrots on the
trees to cage them. Sinnian had fallen from a branch of a tree which broke in
two. That was his end.

* * * * *

“But don’t they come to perform the temple ceremonies?” I asked.
“Thiagarajah was here for the Kodiyyetham last time.”

“But he did not stay in the house. He came, performed the ceremonies and
went away.”

* * * * *
There was no one left to set up the kumbum, the coconut, the kuthivillaku brass lamps, the tulsi flowers and fruit on the veedhi when the Pillayar god passed in his chapparan. The veedhi was swept clean and tended carefully but beyond the wall there was desolation. The walls of the house were crumbling. Only part of the big house remained.

“See.” Pathmanathan pointed out to the remains of the foundation. “The house must have extended up to this point.”

* * * * *

Soon the walls would come down, and how would they divide this up when there were so many heirs? Would each person carry off its bricks and tiles, pillars and doors, and leave only an empty space?

I felt a sense of shame for my husband’s family. Their ancestral property was now like the land of the disinherited. Even the spiritual life was barren. All that Achchi could remember of the teaching of the family guru, Yogaswamy, was that a portion of her food should be left for the kaka, the vahanam of Saturn. If she did not appease Saturn, it would be a bad period for her.

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“Rasathi, eat. Why don’t you eat?”

But she kept her head down and refused to touch anything on the laden table.

The child watched the three faces intently and fearfully.

Her uncle’s voice pleaded.

In the soft diffused light of oil-lamps her aunt’s pretty face pouted.

The third woman served them. She wore a flounced skirt and lace-edged jacket with full sleeves and tucked bodice fastened with gold buttons. There were many delicious dishes on the table, and the unknown woman softly tried to persuade them to eat.

* * * * *

They had travelled for hours by horse carriage to come to Kandy. The child had glimpses of green paddy fields, tea estates, winding roads past thickly wood-
ed hill slopes, climbing, climbing till they arrived in this cool misty evening at the house by the lake.

The uncle had brought them from Colombo to see the perahera.

The light shone on the aunt's jewels, the brilliants in her nose, the golden thali round her neck. Her face kept looking to the wall, and at last the child understood.

The picture on the wall was a large photograph of the uncle in an elaborate frame. Years later the child knew that she had been brought to the house of her uncle's mistress.

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She herself was now old, her movements restricted by arthritis.

She got out of her narrow bed and walked towards the altar where she began her prayer rituals.

She thought of all the lands sold by him. Land in the business heart of Colombo which was now worth millions of rupees. The houses and properties signed away by him.

If only those deeds could be unearthed, her children would be rich, and she herself not be dependent on anyone.

Anyway, where was the money to be spent on all these lawsuits?

And, she thought, now it is no longer important. Nothing is important except that she should at last turn her attention to herself to nourish the last flicker of life and keep it burning steadily, steadily, until she lay herself on her pyre.

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It is the duty. Always it is the duty of a son in a Tamil family to look after a mother or a mother-in-law. For this accepted tradition no one need give thanks. We do not acknowledge thanks.

* * * * *
The sister writes bitterly from New Zealand. She is alienated from the entire family.

* * * * *
Washing the excreta off her body and her feet.
Cutting the crusts off her bread.
Taking the food to her feet.
Tending her in sickness.
Giving her a home after she is abandoned by her own children.
Clothing her.
Heating the water for her baths.
Washing her clothes.
Making her the innumerable hot drinks she wants.
Putting up with her dishonesty, her arrogance, her sarcasm.
Accepting her after years and years of being shut off from the family.

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Pitiful.

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"It is the son’s duty to look after the mother," she says.

* * * * *

The sister writes: "... in my opinion, a kind thought, a gesture to one's mother or mother-in-law, does not warrant any thanks or gratitude ... Lakshmi akka in whom mother had most faith has abandoned her. Rajan has illegally leased out ten perches of land and got nine lakhs for himself. Not a cent of this to me, brothers, or mother. And sometimes causing enough trouble to prevent sale of the house."

* * * * *

Achchi folds and refolds the old sarees in her suitcase. No home of her own.
No money. The son in England too no longer exists in her mindscape. She is lost.

* * * * *

All these years what did you do for me and my children? All these years you did not even look at us. What are all these lies you feed yourself with? You belong to the great Vellala clan. Your family guru was Yogaswamy. What did you teach your children?

“It is the duty of the sons in a traditional Tamil family to look after the mother.”

* * * * *

Stranger.
Intruder.
 Outsider.
Disrupter of traditions.
Myself.

* * * * *

It is now your duty ……

(End Part I)

NOTES

1. The god is bathed with milk and fruit juices (thirtham). This milk is offered to the devotee at the pooja to the gods in the Hindu temple. The devotee takes it in his or her own palm and tastes it. It is sweet tasting.

2. According to the customs and rituals of Tamil traditions, the youngest son in a Hindu family always torches the funeral pyre of the mother. He holds the torch behind him and then brings it forward and sets fire to the pyre. Thus (“with the burning flames”) he bears the flame in his hand.

3. Achchi—grandmother, married old lady. A respectful form of address, it is used in Sri Lanka by both Sinhalese and Tamils, but only Tamils use it for an older married woman. Sinhala athamma = grandmother.

5. Yaham—sacred fire used in Hindu rituals.
6. Bridegrooms of death = Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Eelam = old name for Jaffna. The Tamil Tigers are also called The Boys, Militants, Tigers, Terrorists. In the traditional Hindu marriage ceremonies the bridegroom fastens a gold necklace (thali) around his neck. The "bridegrooms of death" wed themselves to death by wearing cyanide capsules around their necks. If captured, many of them commit suicide by swallowing the cyanide.
7. This story is taken from a collection of myths and legends of India edited by Orom Ghosh. It is one of the Jataka Tales, stories of the birth of Buddha.
8. Ul-mutham = the inner courtyard in a traditional Tamil house in Jaffna.
9. Velvi = the Hindu ritual of slaughtering a goat for sacrifice in the temple precincts.
10. Sannasas = deeds of gift engraved on metal (gold, copper) or rock; gifts bestowed by a king for hereditary services performed in a feudal society.
11. Achchi speaks Tamil, Sinhala and English. She feels that English, the language of her daughter-in-law, is not so comfortable on her tongue, but she uses English creatively and does not realize the originality of "words drop like stones."
12. Godaya (Sinhala) = rustic, villager. Here implying unsophisticated people.
13. Ni = you. Colloquial form of address. A mother can use it to her children but it would be disrespectful for children to use it to the mother. Children must say ningal to denote respect for elders and betters. Va = come. Po = go. Vanga and ponga are imperatives less authoritative in tone.
14. Ariwarl = a sharp steel blade set in a block of wood; the user sits on the block of wood and slices vegetables and fish on the blade; the size of the blade varies according to the items sliced.
17. Here Rajan refers to his mother. He is telling Kumar's wife about the conflict between his own wife, Mohini, and his mother.
18. Nalavar = among Jaffna Tamils, the palmyrah/toddy tappers caste, tree-climbing caste. Here an expression of a derogatory social attitude on the part of the Vellalas, high caste.
19. In traditional Hindu marriage ceremonies the bride and bridegroom go round the sacred fire.
20. Babo = a term expressing affection; a pet name; small child; innocence, kindness.
22. Naaki kata (Sinhala) = naaki = old, kata = mouth.
23. Parvum = expression of sympathy, pity.
24. Kolam = traditional design drawn with rice flour on the threshold of a Hindu house during the festival of Thai-Pongal, held in January. Mattu Pongal, the Festival of the Cows, is also part of these celebrations.
25. Vahanam = vehicles of the gods, e.g.; the peacock of Muruga/Skanda.
26. After an automobile accident, Skanda, the first born son of Rajan and Mohini, dies at the early age of 23.
27. Cadjans = woven coconut fronds used to cover the roofs of village houses.
28. Kumbum = brass pot decorated with mango leaves; placed on a table or altar together with paddy or coconuts of flowers or fruits; used in poojas to the gods.
29. Tulsi = a plant used in Hindu rituals; offered on the pooja tray together with coconut halves, fruits, flowers, holy ash, kum kumum, thirtham, sandlewood.
30. Thalapa = turban. At marriage ceremonies bridegrooms wear elaborately arranged thalapas.
31. Porrial = fried mutton curry cooked with spices, chillies, and thick coconut milk.
32. Kethu = Saturn.
33. Kachal = fever.
34. "Come and see..." The young man who wishes to be betrothed to a young woman invites her to view the crescent moon. If she refuses, it is a sign that she does not wish to be betrothed to him.
35. Veena = Indian stringed musical instrument.
36. Chapparam = chariot; in temple festivals the gods are taken round in highly ornate chariots.
37. Vanniyar = hereditary chieftain, semi-independent, who lived in the Vanni area.
38. Vidanes (Sinhala) = officials in the feudal era. A hierarchy of officials carried out the King’s orders. Part of the administrative set up continued through the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods in Sri Lanka.
39. Kuruve = having to do with elephants. Certain villages had to provide tribute of elephants.
40. Saravanamuttu = Pata.
41. Suryanamaskara = worship of the sun god.
42. Sadham = milk rice cooked for a festive occasion with coconut milk, jaggery, raisins.
43. Viridam, fasting among Hindus, occurs on Fridays or throughout the duration of temple festivals/ 
44. Pottu, tilak = Tamil caste marks. Pottu = rounddot placed on the forehead between the eye brows. Sago is roasted black and ground into a fine paste for pottu.
45. Chetty = an ethnic minority in Sri Lanka.
46. Kodiyetham = putting up the flag at the temple before the ceremonies commence.