

Classic Poetry Series

Ayyappa Paniker
- poems -

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Ayyappa Paniker(12 September 1930 - 23 August 2006)

Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker, sometimes spelt "Ayyappa Panicker" was an influential Malayalam poet, literary critic, and an academic and a scholar in modern and post-modern literary theories as well as ancient Indian aesthetics and literary traditions. He was one of the pioneers of modernism in Malayalam poetry, where his seminal works like Kurukshethram (1960), considered a turning point in Malayalam poetry, Ayyappapanikkarude Krithikal and Chintha and several essays were an important influence on the playwrights of his generation.

In an academic career which ran in consonance with his literary one, and spanned four decades, he taught in various colleges and universities before retiring as the Director, Institute of English, University of Kerala. He published over 25 works, translated several important work to Malayalam, including Guru Granth Sahib and a book in French; as a scholarly editor he produced numerous anthologies on Indian literature, he was the chief editor of the Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literary Encyclopaedia. Another important work by him Indian Narratology, published by IGNCA, was the first of its kind to study various forms of the art of narration, in Indian literature, starting with Vedic and oral literature to Buddhist and contemporary literature.

Early Life and Education

Paniker (his preferred spelling) was born in Kavalam near Alappuzha to E. Naryanan Namboodiri, a Namboodiri Brahmin of Periyamana Illam, and M. Meenakshamma. Fourth of the eight children, six of them girls, he grew up without any paternal affection, while his mother died when he was 12 years old, this early anguish and solitude deeply reflected in his poetry, which he started writing when he was in high school.

The Kavalam village, was also home to people like, K. M. Panikkar, historian and administrator, and playwright and poet, Kavalam Narayana Panicker, his cousin. He published his first poem at the age of 16, published in the Mathrubhoomi Weekly. He did his Intermediate at Malabar Christian College, Kozhikode, and B.A. Honours in English Literature from the University College, Thiruvananthapuram in 1951, thereafter he received his Master's degree from the University of Kerala.

Paniker took his doctorate from Indiana University with a doctoral dissertation on the poetry of [Robert Lowell](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-lowell/), supervised by Prof. Robert E. Gross, subsequently he did post-doctoral research in Yale and Harvard University (1981–82).

Career

Paniker joined CMS College, Kottayam as a lecturer of English in 1951, after working there for a year, he joined the Mahatma Gandhi College, Thiruvananthapuram. He started teaching at the University College, in Thiruvananthapuram in 1952, and did so till 1965. At this point, he became a Professor at the Institute of English and Head of the department in University of Kerala (1965–74). In 1974, he became Reader in English, at the Institute of English under University of Kerala, a post he held till 1980, when became Dean of Faculty of Arts in the University of Kerala, he retired in 1990.

Through his long career he lectured in many national and international universities, including around 25 universities in US, where came across poets [James Dickey](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-dickey/), [John Hollander](http://www.poemhunter.com/john-hollander/), [Czeslaw Milosz](http://www.poemhunter.com/czeslaw-milosz/) and [Allen Ginsberg](http://www.poemhunter.com/allen-ginsberg/).

Awards and Recognition

Paniker was a recipient of a number of honours including the Padma Shri, Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for poetry and criticism, Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry, 2005 Saraswati Samman for his collection of writings Ayyappa Panikerude Krithikal, Distinguished Teacher award, [Mahakavi Ulloor](http://www.poemhunter.com/ulloor-s-parameswara-iyer/) award for poetry, Kabir Samman, International man of the year (IBC, Cambridge, UK), Indira Gandhi memorial fellowship with lead to the book, Indian Narratology published by IGNCA, Gangadhar Meher National award for poetry, [Asan](http://www.poemhunter.com/kumaran-asan/) prize and Jana Sanskriti award (Abu Dhabi), [Vayalar](http://www.poemhunter.com/vayalar-ramavarma/) award, and [Vallathol](http://www.poemhunter.com/vallathol-narayana-menon/) award.

Personal Life

He died in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) on 23 August 2006 at the age of 76 and was survived by his wife and two children. He was cremated the following day in his native village, Kavalam, in a plot he had set apart twelve years ago for the purpose, on the western side of his traditional family house, Olickal tharavad. The house finds reference in several of his works, especially in his poem 'Kavalam' in the anthology Pathumanippookkal.

Legacy

Ayyapa Foundation was formed in 2006 in Thiruvananthapuram, to promote his work and Malayalam poetry. The January 2007 issue of journal Samyukta, was dedicated entirely to him, it contained 10 critical essays on him and his work, besides three collections of his verse in English translation, one of which, Poetry at Midnight published for the first time. It also contained a 36-page bibliography of his oeuvre. In September, 2009, Dr Sitakant Mahapatra delivered the 'Ayyappa Paniker commemorative speech 2009 at Thiruvananthapuram.

A Glass

A glass for religious rituals
A glass for philosophy
A glass for the gods now dead
A glass for the statues that never die
A glass for the rising pillars looking for a roof
A glass for the politicians of the Syntagma Square
A glass for the never-ending processions
A glass for Yanis Ritsos
Waking up from jail memories
A glass for Odysseus Elytis
Lamenting for Helen

O the endless range of hills
That turns on their back in nightmares
Listening to battle drums for centuries
How many centuries you had to smoulder
In memory of Alexander who went
To annex empires, brandishing his whip
Apollo who plays on the strings
Athena who teaches tantrums
Artemis the family planner
Aphrodite with Cupid totting his handgun
They say the time of the gods is gone
The newly elected gods have already arrived
Export models.
In the international conspiracy,
Hellas, your turn also has come
Today it is full moon in Piraes
A full moon each
In the sky, on the land, and in the sea
On the blushing cheeks
Of the wine-drunk bride of Greece
The irreverent wind weaves a spectrum
Today we forget legend and history
Today we sink into the presence of the Present
We have discovered each other
Both of us are the ancients.

Ayyappa Paniker

Beyond Death

THIS strange morning
the spread-out feather
is charred and falls
while the earth groans!

The factory blazes
in the whirl of gas
that kills in a single breath
Death flames all around
and the headless bird
wings in circles
Foul is this water
foul is this air
foul indeed my mind
this earth and heaven
On the sprig flickers
the dripping leaf
in burnt flowers
the smell of corpse
Tragedy submerges
the poet and the poem
while the earth groans

Before the bubble bursts
man raises one hand
and for ever sinks
while the earth groans
The leader at the square
strangles the mike
aloud he shouts;
``Give me the power!"
The deluge invades
the very dais
while the earth groans;
``The son of man,
my last-born,
has he brought
but the curse of death?"
Never again will these cells

wake up alive
never will these genes
be born again

The four directions
now stand aghast
and wait for the white night
while the earth groans.

Over there:

Hunger roasts
a hundred twigs
that curl and fall
the dark continent
starves and dies
the developing ones
swallow poison

Over here;

burning citizens
draw back from hell
the clouded sky cracks
and the legacy of pain
spills over generations
while the earth groans
The sun grows pale
unable to bear this heat
the sea collapses
and the waves mumble
as the earth groans

Wierd shapes will
wander this earth,
curse the paternal seed
forgiving none

The water in cupped hands
the air just breathed in
the very universe
is under a curse

Gargoyles will arise
unable to tell
where father mother
sister died
or lie buried
Cries of lamentation

viscous on the earth,
will clot to silence
Knowing that a time will come
when one may not even cry
the earth now groans
Here the sons
cut off heads
here the daughters
scorch the foetus
Has the time come
to finish off the race
has man had enough of it?
The earth does groan
and with it every sun
every planet, every star
the celestial nebula
the milky highway
the wails of the earth
echo far away
(A planet out there
halts on its rounds
to watch the earth!)

But no one is here
no son of man
to listen or care
when the earth groans
There they hang
the powers that be
heads downwards
fluttering like bats
beckoning darkness
singing the praise of power
Adding capital to interest
adding interest to capital
flying skull and bones
disfiguring science
brandishing statistics
to vindicate untruth
They swim in these tears
they fatten up on this blood
sowing and reaping death
they challenge man's destiny.

Unless that challenge is met
this earth will go barren
so she groans till we listen
O for a million hands
a million million hands
to wipe off her tears
The hands of those
not vain about
the light of the day
nor insulting to
the dark of the night
The hands of those
that honour the past
of those that look
forward to the future
These hands
should rise
and wave aloft
These throats
should open
and sing aloud!

Ayyappa Paniker

Bhagavathykunjamma's Bharatanatyam

It was the end of Kaikottikali*
and the beginning of Bharatanatyam for Bhagavathykunjamma.

Legs close, yet apart, must be bent.
Not that way, this way, not this way, that way...
The feet must only be this far.
The hair this way, the face that way
the mudras must be this way, see? .

Kunjamma found it tough to master.
Whatever she did, turned out to be Kaikottikali.
She was told
She was shown
The body was arched
The steps were numbered
The mridangam ** was played
Kunjamma stuck to Kaikottikali.

Finally, Nethyamma herself came.
In nice, new linen
Tried to teach dance
In clap-dance style.
New steps
New gestures
Arms swirling
Feet twirling
Porridge everytime.

With blessings on the forehead
Bhagavathikunjamma learnt Bharatanatyam.
Then for a long period,
She presented Bharatanatyam
trained a lot of them.
That's how Bharatanatyam Bhagavathiamma
became famous.
Are you listening? .

*a kind of folk, clap-dance popular in Kerala, usually played by pairs in a group.
**a percussion instrument.

Ayyappa Paniker

Epitaph

Here lies the body of Mister Paniker
who at the end of his panicking days
agreed to lie still for a while.
It's not known what happened to his soul
if indeed he ever had one.
He wasn't quite unlike any of us while he lived;
his flesh to tell the truth often revolted
and upset his delicate sensibility.
Space he could never control to his liking;
his sense of time you know wasn't strong either.
He had of course in his wallet many a theory;
the things he could touch however
told him a different story.
All his life he was patiently
learning how not to live at all.
Who knows perhaps
given another chance
he might do a better job of it than before.
And you who pass by
do not stop here for long
but move on quietly to the nearest graveyard
that may be waiting for you.

Ayyappa Paniker

Every Dog Has His Night

The drawing room in his house is filled with animals.
Animals cast in bronze, steel and brass.
Trained to remain quiet, they
turned to quite a noisy racket last night.

It was the turn of the dogs yesterday.

One's bark sparks off the rest.

Restless, on hearing that, the foxes begin to howl.
The brass lion rose up to roar.
Roar's the word in the textbook;
tried, but having caught a cold, forsook
returned to the cave itself.

When the singers were settled after the symphony
I too dozed, but
couldn't bark.

So that's all for now, isn't it enough.

Ayyappa Paniker

Father And Mother Do Not Speak To Me

Father and mother do not speak to me
What about the younger brother?
He minds his own affairs
Let the next birth be in India
I should like to believe in rebirth, but...
Don't you go to the stadium and the tagora?
There are enough of American tourists there.
Their cameras are twinkling all the time.
They must have forgotten to take their eyes.
Why are you so sad today?
You saw Aravindan's 'Pokkuvayil,' didn't you?
Good to learn that there are such people here and there.
Do you know these extremists?
It seems they are more imaginative.
Why so lonely in Athens where twenty-five lacs live?
Maybe, because there are so many.
Athens, Athens, you too drink foreign wine?
Everything is business, Sir?
Who are you?
Athena or Aphrodite
Hera or Artemis
Zues' Ganymede
Or a shepherd girl
In the villages that still survive?

Ayyappa Paniker

Gallnut

Bite me not and beat me not, O hurt me not so hard,
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours, O mummy,
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours.

I won't say it's bitter, I won't say it's sour,
I'll gulp this gallnut, dear mummy,
I'll hold this lit~~ phial for you.

When the kitchen is silent, and the bedroom quiet,
Then, you hag, your gallnut brew
Becomes a stain on my tongue,
A mole on my nose
A curse in my mouth.

My hands have grown long, my feet are swollen
My ears shrivelled, my eyes dimmed, my cheeks blown.

Beat me not and hit me not, O kick me not in the crotch.
I'll gulp this gall nut, and when all the other ones -
The green gall nut,

The white gall nut,
The red gall nut
Form a brew that goes down my throat, O mummy,
Bite me not and beat me not, O hurt me not so hard,
I'll gulp this gallnut of yours.

But when at last I'm filled with this gall,
I'll put a little noose around your neck, O mummy dear,
And when you are floored, piggy you, and look
this way and that,
Don't you ever come outdoors at all, -
Or then I'll snatch away your rings and your bells.

Ayyappa Paniker

Hey Gagarin

Hey Gagarin, devourer of Space,
I come, a wayfarer, get off my tracks!
Yield today
to my moral concerns,
to my poetic fancy,
to my creative urge.
Before you measure out
all these expenses
so neglected and underdeveloped,
where man's speculations
had all these years
let the lord of creation graze,
all these heavenly worlds,
all these abysses,
before this moonbeam vanishes,
before my eyes close here,
hey Gagarin, devourer of Space,
I come, a wayfarer; get off my tracks!

Receive my greetings,
receive my congratulations,
but keep away from my arrow range,
my free thoughts surge forward,
breaking all fetters,
So get off my tracks!

Today the sun and the moon and the stars,
the impressions of evening, night and dawn,
my desires and hopes, this dear earth,
the perpetual movement at the movable and the immovable,
this beautiful infection of love,
the horizon, a witness to the rising and setting sun,
this broken beam of light dissolving in it;
these have all surrendered to your merciful dispensation!

Today the scientific mind
juggles with satellites,
and you have emerged as the leader
of the yakshas, kinnaras, devas and demons,

all of them highfliers,
turning east and west into meaningless terms,
bringing under measure what is deep and what is broad.

My friends and foes,
my master and servant,
my wakefulness, my sleep,
time that seemed to go slow for my sake;
these were upset when you flew;
but the creative spirit in me
hopes to share your immortality
on the rockbed of dreams.

Fellow-poets that stare in stupor!
Grow new wings to catch up with Science
across the recesses of outer space.
The pioneers have unfurled their flags on the heights;
break you your idols, and bless yourselves.
Nothing is empty any more, nothing is outside of us;
the whole universe is filled with subtle sensations.
Where is our telescope, where our thermometer?
Brandish the torch, fulfil the urge to create,
cut off the barriers of time and space,
keep the spirit ablaze that will burn up
every trace of death-dealing darkness!

Ayyappa Paniker

Hoogly

Stop writing about rivers!
Rivers bring in flood waters
and drown the towns.
The long-awaited rains
swell into seas.
Hooghly is no river;
she is an ocean,
the end of all time,
floating huts,
writhing beasts,
dogs that don't bark,
cats that have lost their appetite,
virgins who no longer blush,
mothers not worried about kids,
labourers that dream of long legs,
refugees that wake not from their pavement sleep,
beggars praising the philanthropists of heaven.
Hooghly is the ultimate truth,
the embrace of darkness.

Sing no more about rivers!
They cleanse sewers with fresh water;
they dispel the dirt of the ages;
they wash the tired roads with Gangajal,
and give them a new life;
they gather the tears of the grieving man
to raise the salinity of the sea;
intertwining thoughts that refuse to flow,
they line up the crowds in long marches,
and make them reverberate as a single slogan.

High tide in the Hooghly,
verbal tirade in the A.I.R.,
deluge of pictures in the T.V.,
the glory of Ganga where the snows of sin melt,
the splendour of Bengal where sinners dissolve,
the tremulous voice of Rabindranath, poet of all seasons,
Calcutta, the city of cities -
Hooghly enfolds everything.

The night of miracles has come.
Dharmtala Street turns into Lenin Sarani;
history takes a deep breath in Satranj ke khilari;
the Victoria Memorial pales in the eyes of Vivekananda;
the National Library pays homage to Vallathol.
Above the branches of the trees that break and fall,
above the rainclouds that startle and crash;
above the howl of the turbulent hurricane,
flames the Rebel of Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Under the frozen streets,
within the sobbing bubbles,
in the wing-wispers of the birds that have crashed
through the cold and lost their way,
Banalata Sen roams about seeking Jibanananda.

Nightmares that have moved into the city involuntarily
from villages exhausted and haunted by the irregularities
of the weather
hungers squeezing the breasts withheld from bones,
the present munching groundnut on Chowrangee Street,
the invisible city swaying behind the visible one,
the river digging up the city's roots for their scent,
the bridge of marrowless bones across the river,
the rails pointing their fingers towards Howra, the houri
of the city,
the bustle weary of itself at last in the search for silence;
Naresh, Naresh!
a father who has reached the other world calls
from the other half of the homeland now split,
and the feathered leadership of religious rift
that turned the land of gold into a sheet of lead echoes,
Naresh, Naresh!
The snake-waves of the Hooghly, the wave-snakes
of the Padma
hiss and shout; Girish, Mahesh, Suresh...
the tale of a hardship that has filtered down
in the shadow of the sword-wielding Kali,
the holy dip in the gurgling, bursting sewage canal,
the peace quest of Santiniketan, now washed
by the flood;

Calm down, Hooghly, calm down!
You are only a river,
just a water channel,
a plough-cut furrow.

Poets and story-tellers have gone to protect the roots
of the villages;
the villagers in their turn have sought refuge in the towns,
And the ministers go on their rounds
to frighten the Hooghly into obedience.
`` Five hundred are dead,
six hundred are nowhere to be seen..."

Every season has its own melody.
Hiren Mukherji whispered to Jyoti Basu;
`` Socialism seems to be closing in on us."
Siddharta Shankar Ray reminded P.C. Sen;
`` Haven't I said this earlier? "

There's nothing that they haven't said earlier;
Hooghly laughed,
Hooghly who is unwilling to flow under the bridge,
Howrah swinging and clinking in her chains,
the ulcer stench scattering wide from partitioned power.

Once upon a time there was a river valley civilisation here.
Floods were cheaper then.
In those days there came a wayfarer, a wastrel,
from the land of two monsoons,
but no record of his whispers to history has survived.

A river
and a city
gobbled up each other.
What you've seen is its memorial,
What you've heard.

Ayyappa Paniker

Horse Play

Four gallant horses
galloped forth.

One was white, one was black,
one was red, one was brown.

One had four legs,
one had three,
one had two,
and the fourth had one leg.

The one-legged horse
said to the others :
the time for dance has come,
sweet friends,
let's dance on a single hoof !

All of them liked the idea,
and the dance began.
The four-legged horse fainted outright,
the three-legged horse slipped and fell,
the two-legged horse limped to a fall :
only the one-legged one
danced on and on.

Ayyappa Paniker

Isn'T That Shameful For Us?

Everyday
at night
in the kitchen
a little food
must be kept.

Suppose,
the thief was to come
if he's hungry
doesn't find food
He
might get angry
and cross
and get away
without thieving a thing.

Isn't that shameful for us?.

Ayyappa Paniker

Net

The squares at least
don't remain squares
and taut
linking loops
Threadbare
wet-looking
ropes
Knotted
trapped and trembling
lie in thirst
The sea at large
lusting
to drink in measures
Through the loops
drainscapes
the sea
Sardines, anchovies and seer
From the infinite
indefinite
water bodies
To the freedom attained
through assured bondage
of a definite ending
For
the fishes
in waiting
the
net's
a mirror
through which
they swim
to another world.

Ayyappa Paniker

Passage To America

I.

On the day of the feast
death had its celebration
the teevees and the movies
told us the same story
death in the morning death in the evening
death in the cellar death in the alley
death on the highway the boy returning from the rally
death in the cornfield the girl going to the grocer's
death in the valley and high on the mountain
death from pollution and great disillusion
death in the mind in the womb in the cradle
death from belief and its comic relief
the winds from the north and the winds from the south
sowed the seeds of death and waited for the harvest
death was riding nightmares
on the streets of civilization
someone had coughed in the women's room
and kleenex caught her vaginal sneeze
while history knocked at the door
and waited in the winter outside
the computer counted the errors
and discounted others
a woman had died but it was a mistake
someone wanted to undo it
learned it was too late
and walked to the seashore
and watched the tidal waves
death was riding the receding waves
death was roaring in the generation gap
and lying in history's lap
was sucking on its sap
on the day of the feast
death had its celebration
knocked out of sleep by the casualty list
someone was still groping in daylight
but it's christmas and new year
time to stop worrying over those that are dead
time to start thinking of living yet

while the sun is still hot and the day not done
perhaps a mistake to suppose it so
it's easy enough to suppose it so
and it's easy enough to die in these circumstances
but think of the horror and the glory of having to live

II.

My sitar
my guitar
from east or west
i do not care
whatever i dare
is for the best
fingers of the left
tripping on nipples
fingers of the right
strumming the ripples
around the lotus bud
as we set on the bed
each petal quakes
as the raga awakes
raises in dizzy spirals
towers and gyres
steeple and spires
domes and minarets
pagodas pyramids
fabled hoofs
trot on gabled roofs
as the tala quickens
we rocket to the heavens
to gather the starlust
and then we fall
falter and fall
like flakes of feathered snow
sprinkled with stardust
o my guitar
o my sitar

III.

Having learnt
in a short lifetime
that chalk doesn't write on chalk

he turned
to look
for sunflowers
in beds
of roses

IV.

Twice-punctured silver belle
suspended in the cerulean
her sea of tranquility
disturbed by hymen penetration
her darkness filmed and douched
unable to recover her cherry nights
fears yet longs for
the next assault
in sweet dread of periodic stress
her bashful beams dreaming downward
for a metallic man-thrust

V.

The poet chews the afternoon like his moustache
he drones on about a new civilization
his mystic beard points to the seed of time
his tongue trips on the syllables of a sutra
my girl she sleeps
and slides on to my shoulder
her breasts rise and fall
where the words of the poet rebound
her dark green shirt exudes the smell of sweat
her golden hair the sinuous oily flesh of hair
curves creeps and curls into my veins
words wary sliders reveal their mystery
my girl she stirs turns around
her bellybutton shows a foetus face
a snake tongue smacks her swollen lips
the soft hairs on her upper lip
now moist and alive
a dog walks in and lies down at my feet
he listens to the poet
reading chanting enchanting
like a dream called off in the middle
the poet pauses poised for breath between the mantras
the tangled thighs of minutes

the dog gets up stretches himself walks away
wagging his tail in total agreement
soft nervous fingers touch me from the side
they keep me from the poet
a dog is dignified by his tail
i wish i had one

VI.

Time to say farewell
Pale faces
after a nightlong wake
do not need to kiss
Before another nightfall
sometime during the day
we have to say farewell
How shall we part then
Write an autograph
and put a period after it
Take a long walk
and sigh in the wind
Recite a few verses
and smile at the end
Perhaps a last smutty story
to leave a scratch on the memory
Look how the spring sun
Struggles with the rain!

VII.

It's as if i suddenly meet you on the way
when i go for my usual walk in the evening
the earth that begins at your feet
seems to end at mine
the air you breathe out
enters into my lungs
and the light that escapes from your eyes
focuses on mine
america
i see your map
like the palm of a hand stretched out on my lap
mississippi traces your lifeline to the south
while the great lakes draw circles
along the st lawrence headline

but where is your heartline
on the mount of jupiter
new england cocks its eyes at europe
your venus is still in heat
in the far south of florida
and the mount of moon
shimmers on the california beach
but america
where has vanished your heartline
has some test explosion
sucked it underground
i remember river phalgun
that goes dry in summer defying our prayers
where once the buddha got enlightenment
and learned to take the earth for a begging bowl
but here the fission and the fusion
your scientists envision
offer your palmist nothing but confusion
sailing back from mescaline to marijuana
someone said
there never was such a line
in this ancient newborn land
where we grow corn and PL 480
and make cover tv sets in plenty
till our chests are nearly empty
and brains spout tons of TNT
it's christmas again
the shape of a heart neatly pinned to a cross
that stands on a hill we have set up with skill

(Translated by the author, with the help of J.O. Perry, Dakshinamoorthy, K. Satchidanandan, and Esther Y. Smith.)

Ayyappa Paniker

Sappho's Dirge

Looking at the Pleiades
Poetess Sappho sheds tears
Do the Pleiades ever know
That a friend here is waiting for them
Magic and marvel fill the green isles
That throb like the rosary of the sea
The spark, the dream, and the sea-speak:
Surging and surfing over the waves of Time
Fighting and fighting, the men are in ruins
Still they are beating the war-drums again
Divorced and distempered the women in huts
Are distressed without enough drinking water
They shout there is no place at home
For those who do not return to work at home
We shall never clear their debts
We stand only for ourselves hereafter

Watching the Pleiades
Sappho sings her tears
To listen to the dirge of long waiting
The Pleiades come down

Ayyappa Paniker

Song Of Myself

Because I remain quiet at home,
the earth still goes on its rounds;

because I snore lying in my bed,
the solar systems shine;

because I chew and munch and spit,
Time is on the move;

because I care for the girl I married,
birth and life and death do merge.

If I'm not there, 0 people, no action is there,
neither flower nor honey nor bee;

the peacocks, the clouds, the gardens:
my kindness makes them glow.

Bow to me, and sing my glory,
and fall at my feet;

for those who go about praising me,
even hell is heaven for ever!

Ayyappa Paniker

Sunflower Face

What grief is melting in your thoughtful eyes,
You with the face of the Sun? What song of sorrow
Is wafting in your tremulous lips? But perhaps
This song and grief are not yours, in fact—maybe,
I am passing on to you the fire in my chest, although
They suit you too so well—this lament of my boat
Crashing in the sea at your wharf—I did so sway
The billows that it might not enter your ears--
When a solar system stops its momentum on its own,
When the dry Ganga of the Milky Way burns up
Like a sandy channel and writhes for water,
O Sunflower Face, will you come and open your ears
Like a whirlwind that tears away the roots of my vowels
And consonants, which keep flowing like a mere song?
Till now I haven't drawn even a little painting for you,
Nor have I composed a simple light song for you--
And yet you have guarded the western gateway of kindness,
And guarded this sea-wharf, where my corpse is floating,
As well as the pain I have cherished like under-water fire

O Sunflower Face, words of curse are indeed on the tip
Of my tongue, sharp words seething with hellish torture,
I shall not sprinkle these singeing words on anybody's head,
Lest they should boomerang some day or other, and so
Thinking, I remain dumb even now, as always.

Look! These sea waves sometimes in the morning lie
Without motion, their vast expanse seems like a bed-sheet,
The folds will not move, they may beckon as if to tempt
Us to lie on them, hearing the call we may take a close look,
And if our eyes are O.K, in that stillness we shall learn
The thirst of the sea, the depth of the sea, the orgasmic spell
Of the sea, the cruelty of the sea, the hypnotic electric measure
Of the sea. The sea's measure is the glory of the strong goddess
Who saved the threefold powers that lay crying and crawling
In the primordial waters of primal energy at the time of Creation.
As we invoke and awaken that Sea-mother, giving her life,
Installing her figure drawn on the floor, as it were,
What is it that you whisper into my ears, strange!

That this is the truth, that this alone is truth, do you
Whisper into my ears? Touching my cheek, you
Pour into my ears this electric charm—the spell
Of the wounds of love and affection and sweetness,
That assumes a form and pulsates here on the floor.

Sunflower Face, I am not just drawing your picture
In colours--but merely trying to mark a figure
In my home courtyard with the fresh powder of
This lengthening moonlight, just for nothing at all--
Only trying to draw a new world, just like that--
Seeking colours, singing the colours. Accept this,
O Sunflower Face!

Surajmukhi, the top of your head, your forehead,
Your eyebrows, your eyelids that close and open
The temples of your eyeballs, letting out a glow,
Your eyelashes that bend down along with them,
Your cheeks, bulging underneath, full of blood,
Your nostrils that keep humming the scent of birds,
Your lips blossoming below, your teeth in between,
With a little sheen, O Sunflower Face, as I inhale
The magnificence of your face, I can hear
The petals of your opening flower bud,
The gentle smile that breaks into an awareness,
And the rays of light that radiate from it, far and wide.

Is it the early soft vernal season of the rustling bosoms
Is it the hard winter of the rubbing hands and palms
Or is it the summer when toes begin to tinkle:
Tell me, Surajmukhi, how do the pictures drawn by
Your Sun turn into such strange, unexpected visions?
The thoughts that arise from your honeyed navel—
The cryptic magic formulas, the aphorisms, axioms,
How do they become the enveloping black hole enclosed
Within the very structure of this overarching universe?
Is it the fertile autumnal splendour of your cool thighs
Or the arrival of rains recalled by the roots of your arms
Or the full spring that puts out tender shoots from head to foot
Or the cycle of six seasons, stirring the mind and the body alike?

Is it not so, when the figure is lit up by the sprinkling of powders

Of different colours, isn't it? Are they not the fulsome bosoms
Of motherhood, aren't they? Are they not the sacred weapons
Carried in her sixty-four hands, aren't they? Are they not the stars,
Inexhaustible in enumeration, taking the shape of truth in her breasts?
Are they not sprouts of adolescent hopes thrilled at every touch?
Are they not the desires arising from the flow of fresh fragrance?
Clearing the yard of loose sand, making a circle, smearing it
With cow dung, decking it up as holy ground, the hand of joy
Picks up the bowl of powders, and sprinkling them on the ground
Draws something, writes something; is it not the swing and sway
Of strings of waves blossoming among the stream of colors,
Isn't it? The bloody points of spears are aimed at some and
Whirr fast, and blow the conch, with vigour and straight upward,
Aren't they? Hearing it, unable to bear it, do they not seek shelter,
Don't they? There comes the Kolam, enlivened rage, there comes
An awakened world, a resurrected time, there comes, there comes
Interiorized in wrath, beaming forth a tender smile, singing of colours,
Wiping off the colours, entering the grove to put on grace,
There comes the Sunflower Face!

Ayyappa Paniker

The Cockroach

When the cockroach ate the cat,
The rat sat gloomy and sad:
Who will eat me now, alas!
Is Fate too like the cockroach?

Leaping on its sixth leg,
Came the cockroach, and said:
Rat, you need not cry;
I shall eat you too, my dear.
But if, before that, you can
Take a little bit of cat's meat
You will taste better;
And I will like it very much.

When the rat ate the cat's tail,
The rat's tail was in the cockroach mouth.
Is the rationalist, watching in gloom
The cockroach tail, a man?
Is that man a rationalist?

Ayyappa Paniker

The Dawns Pause, Playing On The Santoori

The dawns pause, playing on the santoori:
Tell us your tale, O tragic bride of Greece!
The Sol that wakes up from the Aegean Sea
Climbs over the peaks of Mount Olympus.
Like an aeon has passed by the night
That blended long grief and entertainment.

Scoop out at once a cake of cheese from the moon
That has reached the hill-top and will soon fade away.
The tourist who comes tomorrow should see
The dark patch left by your scooping out.
The disciples of Pythagoras will come and weigh
And tell us the exact weights and measures.
What is of value to us is whatever is left
After the 'counting' of all that are countable.

What sights have we seen that fail to catch the eye?
What songs heard that the ear cannot catch?
What unmeasured distances have we traversed?
What sins gone through, not encountered in Eden?
What pains unknown before have we taken on?
We have conceded, let them be whatever they are.
Now that we have learned that life is not meant
To be spent on reflections over past sorrows,
Please, go on playing nonstop on the santoori,
Until the dawn arrives that brings joy,
Until Zorba sings on the shores of twilight..

Ayyappa Paniker

The Elections

White on black is dirt
The whitewash leaves a patch
Washing linen is nuisance
Don't be upset, O leader!

Is there gold in the hiding place
Is there a place for playing kids
Do you remember waiting for
The autumnal moon and sandal paste

Is it trout that's caught in the net
Is it salmon outside the net
Don't you need anything in hand
To wager when you cast the net

It is election time, election time
O come, do come, dear voters
The power that once upon a time
You appropriated among yourselves
We want you to transfer to us
So we ask for your votes
If you give us your votes
Democracy will triumph here!

Ayyappa Paniker

The Family Saga

I

How unpleasant are those names, and yet
their bitter strength is splendid, splendid
too the human love that lighted the seven wicks
every nightfall. Wasn't it they that reared them all?
Laachi had planted the pomegranate of desire
in the south-eastern corner where it grew splendid;
and Uppali had a mantara in the north-east side.
Thus they grew, the pomegranate and the mantara,
fresh creepers always winding up the branches,
and fresh flowers blossoming on the creepers.
Flowers, even while withering in the dusk
or going off to eternity, guarded their pollen,
and were disinclined to sever connections. They
turned into fruit and ripened and grew sweet;
thus grew the pomegranate and the mantara
as the dusk turned into darkness, darkness into day,
day into darkness again, and again came the day -
seven wicks into five, five into three, and then one,
and again one into three into five into seven.
Black clouds fostered and fondled by summer
shed their tears, the shores of the lagoons
swayed, while there stood the brave one,
his mind unperturbed by the thunder-storm,
his feet unswerving in the wild roaring billows,
his hands unwearied; the brave one stood there
invoking with magic chants the lord of grains,
who would shower plenty on the virgin land,
rousing her and filling her with grain and gold.
His orders became dams and dykes, his thoughts
manifested as a thousand farmhands; with brushwood
and brambles they erected the dykes, the lagoons
drew back and yielded the fertile land, saying,
as the sea once said to a Rama long ago:
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful, be fruitful;
Immortal thoughts are indeed the glory of the earth;
make you this earth rich with grain and fruit!
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful!

II

The month of the Virgin passed, and the dewy sweetness of Libra arrived, as earthen dykes arose, and lifting the watery skirt, the lagoon told the farmhand Kunjan: Go now, and whisper into your master's ears, and tell him, the land is ready to receive the seed; the sowing must be done with a full harvest in view. The Pleiades festival of lights, and the Betelgeuse festival of song and dance passed by; rich manure flowed down from the hills; hundreds of workers in country-boats; the spell of monsoon brought the season of replanting the seedlings. No one seems to have noticed how in two days' time the seeds had sprouted, how two and three and four leaves unfurled, how the flowers got fertilised and turned yellowish. While the eyes kept a busy watch, the emeralds of Capricorn arrived, promising pots of plenty; the sprouted seeds blossomed and ripened to harvest. The measuring baskets overflowed; half-filled bellies got overfilled; the festival of harvest sang of fullness at the new year!

III

The tale of a family with promises yet to be fulfilled lengthens in many ways, Recall now the splendour that crossed the seas, the country and the city made fragrant by a full moon in spring, the light-hearted jokes and little acts of goodness; recall the royal houses, the ministerial abodes, paved with courage of diplomacy or simple cleverness, the leadership of universities, the life at the embassies; recall also another figure, a figure that is cut up like shadows into fragments in broken dream or sleep, like a pledge unredeemed, like a sobbing whisper, like a wisp of moist memory that makes you restless, like the scent of a flower moaning through the breeze: O Kesava, did your hands disappear into an autumnal night of the dark moon? On the pomegranate, the eight-petalled flower blossomed abruptly, fell off its stalk into grief.

How many springs have come and gone, and yet'
they do return with fresh flowers;
how many flowers wither away, and yet
the gardens return to life; recall the mother
who rocked you in her lap and told stories
to entertain you and sang lullabies,
and fed you on the elixir of her breasts.
Recall again the promises, old times
that were brought home for confinement,
with the future yet to be born, families
that came together only to part, candle flames
that burn in the blaze of parting; the tale
of a family with many a pledge unredeemed yet
lengthens in many ways, many ways...

IV

Time is spacious indeed, my love,
let us give up the weeping habit.
From what great depths emerge
even our gentlest smiles!
Don't we see, as we sit together
on the seashore, don't we see
the moon disc slowly unfold
and turn into the purple of
mango leaves and then into white,
tickling the sea into wakefulness,
and a thousand peacocks dance
with spread wings over the billows
rising from the depths? Don't we see
the innocence in the eyes of
guideless children disappear
as they get up and stretch
their hands and legs and emerge
into a shyness that petitions love
through a lotus leaf, and burst into
a Shakuntala, her accusing finger
pointed at the king, and then at the end
dissolve into a serenity, entrusting
the son with the father under the Kashyapa
shade. Bereaved are we all, separated
for long are the earth and heaven,
melting and rolling under the heat

of a grief, caused by an old separation;
melting and rolling and flowing are
these stringed stars and rivers and evenings -
all are bereaved and in isolation for ever,
in the heart of the jungle the granite rocks
melt, and in their springs there drip
the nights that rock the ocean; they too
are bereaved. Once during the night
I walked among the underworlds,
and there I saw, seated at a table,
one recording the history of man;
birth, birth = death, the birth of death,
and death meant the death of birth.
He too was slowly dying ...
So shall we end this lamentation.
Spacious indeed is Time, and my beloved,
this weeping habit we have to give up.

V

Tales that please must be told;
That's what human life is for,
If the poet's tongue matches in length
the ears of those that listen,
it will not bore; the tellers and
hearers will be of one string.
The tale of the bud on the temple tree,
rocked to sleep by the beatings
of bats' wings is not exactly a new one.
The clock with its eyes on the midday sun
striking eight, which startled
the village girl, is an absurd tale.
At the crossroads the hussy spits out
her betel roll, stretching her tongue:
unable to retell her tale of abuse,
the puranas have remained eighteen till now,
There is hunchback Janaki in the neighbourhood;
her hump was straightened by Kittan, but
it was Raman's name that was dragged into it;
his manners do not reveal it, though,
Where that hunchback neighbour is gone
is not quite known, nor do we know
how she got her bow-style ear-rings,

Raman perhaps knows it, but how can
we ask him, for he too is eager
to find out who really bit off his earlobes.
Many such tales fester in my village,
but they won't be very pleasing to you;
they will fill your ears with discomfort.

Once I was walking on the bank of backwaters,
my eyes ploughing the rice-fields, and I saw
and heard around endless tragedies, with a few
light comedies thrown in, all turning into
farces and riddles. The eyes were drawn in,
the ears rolled up; lengthening nights
stretched themselves over the rivers.

` ` Sweet rose, fold yourself; you are not
meant to bloom in this sultry daylight;
your scent and honey shouldn't be wasted
on this dry sand"; whose lament is that?
How did this song come to be heard
here on this earth where river sand
is spread over thick layers of mud?
The elders stand - tall palm trees of old
with wrinkled leaves and broken ribs;
their long penance has come to an end.
Time-fostered beetles and insects and vermin
have taken their place to gnaw at the leaf
and spine and trunk and roots and all.
Over the mud flows the river,
over the river flows darkness,
above the darkness are the blue heavens;
all is dark, all; but there is light
even in this darkness; dark is itself light;
to assert that is the task of man.
As a child I had one great sorrow;
it was that my village had no hill in it;
but now that sorrow is gone, for I see
hills of wickedness all around,
I see the social man is the source
of all power, and not the individual,
I see the bridge across the river of sin
built by the Panchayat. Gone is my grief;
holy and divine is the glory of man!

VI

Sing to the glory of man, O
sing to the glory of man!
To the neighbourhood girl
whose belly is empty
he gives a full belly;
sing to the glory of man, O
sing to the glory of man!
Picking up the songbird
shot down in game,
the woodsman comes singing
of anger and grief and compassion.
Sing to the glory of man, O
sing to the glory of man
who pierces that woodsman
with another arrow.
Liberty, equality,
co-operation, fraternity;
truths are indeed of many kinds;
so sing to the glory of man, O
sing to the glory of man,
who roasts and fries
a generous spirit
and serves it for dinner.

Ayyappa Paniker

The Prophetess

While men keep going to Delphi
To learn about the hidden future,
I should have been a hill
By the roadside covered with snow.

On the branch of a tree where leaves
Wither in the heat of the burning Troy,
I should have been a bird
With the spring crushed in the parched throat.

By the side of the master sage
Who drank from the cup filled with hemlock,
I should have been a night
Cursed by his disciples filled with grief.
I should have been the fate
Endorsed by the master who welcomed the grief.

As the centuries gallop by in a chain,
Their hoofs beating hard,
I should have been the cross
Carried by Poulouse to Corinth.

As the end of the era collapses and falls
Somewhere on the Byzantine highway,
I should have been a palm-leaf note
Wrapped up in a dirty rag.

Ayyappa Paniker

The Twilight Hour Keeps Playing On The Santoori

The twilight hour keeps playing on the santoori,
O honey bride of Greece, tell me now your tale of love!

Olive branches sway and swing in the breeze
That reaches here, blowing across the Mediterranean,
And the breeze that tastes the green of the sprigs
May still have one more tale of love to tell,
And the sea is on the look out for waves of ears
To listen to the love tale of the honey bride of Greece.

Speak to us about your fancies born in the days
That faced the ups and downs in the love affairs
Of the earth's adolescence, long before we began
To measure the duration of time and distance.

Tell us the tale of how the wick of envy was kindled
Since the day you were wedded to the lord of Sparta,
You who were born as the daughter of Leda whom
The god of gods once ravished in the guise of a swan

Recount to us the old tales of illusory Helen,
Whom witless Paris carried off and heaped praises on.
Although the apple that he gave to Aphrodite
Grew into a war that lasted full ten years,

Dig up here, where the islands of grapes,
That pour forth wine afresh into the households
Where five thousand years bow down in homage,
Ripen again and in their epics and legends as well,
The islands, the islands, the islands of freedom
And goodness, the poets and the birds celebrate.

The twilight hour keeps playing on the santoori:
Tell us your tale of love, O honey bride of Greece!

Ayyappa Paniker

The Vision Of The Seasons

The winter is humming something:
Is it for nothing?
Does she say that spring will never
Come again?
Do the summer hills put on a bark
With withered grass?
Do they dream that when the rains come,
They bring sheer joy?
Is the autumn or the glow of transition:
A memory slip?
Will everything at the end turn into
The corpse of a late winter?

Ayyappa Paniker

Theft

Just because I have stolen a few things
why should you call me a thief?

But you have stolen our clothes!
If i have stolen your clothes, your clothes,
it was only to protect your sense of shame,
it was only to protect your sense of shame.

You have stolen our chicken too!

If I have stolen "our chicken," as you say,
it was only to fry it and eat it,
it was only to fry it and eat it.

Then what about our cow you stole?
What about our cow you stole?

The cow, you mean?
Well, if I have stolen your cow, your cow,
it was, it was for me to drink its milk.

My doctor, please note, hasn't said no
to fried chicken or cow's milk.

Whenever one steals something good, something good,
you people raise a clamour for nothing
and dub him a thief, a thief!

It is the fault of your laws,
it is the fault of your laws.
Change you then your laws, I say,
lest your laws should change you!

Ayyappa Paniker

Uncle Indan

One day Uncle Indan wiped the dirt
off his right foot with the left foot
then off the left foot with the right foot
then off the right foot with the left foot
then off the left foot with the right foot
off the right with the left
off the left with the right
off the ...

Ayyappa Paniker

Upon My Walls

Look at the picture my hands have drawn on my walls:
why do you stare? Look carefully, you fool!
Nerves that stretch from the navel and the eyes
thirst and burn in the brain;
copper dreams blossoming on the dead volcano
blaze and flow around;
tears unfrozen, ears unstopped,
the veins keep glowing; is it creation or destruction?
'Look at the picture my hands have drawn on my walls;
why do you stare? Look carefully, you fool!

Ayyappa Paniker

Whatever Happened?

What happened?

To the land of Oedipus tragedy is nothing new.

Do the gods of the Olympus still thirst for war?

Do they try to hypnotize

The cattle-rearing youth

By displaying the neutron bomb?

Remember the time before Alexander's

Expedition of triumph?

Remember too the cursed centuries

That followed?

Will Agamemnon ever come back?

Kill him if he does.

Will Clytemnestra be a party

To the murderous act?

Kill her outright, if she is.

She screams, the sister

Of the son who killed his mother

Who had killed her father-

That scream reverberates over the sea

And on the hill.

When the night shrieks,

The tongue splits.

When the murder cry is heard

It splits the ear.

O Hellas that seeks to be reborn,

Hellas that had once left her husband for good,

And, having had enough of it,

Now returns from her lover.

To blind Homer

You are still the beloved daughter.

Penelope welcoming Odysseus

Who had sailed home in the gentle wind.

The dog still remembering his master.

Where have they all vanished?

Ayyappa Paniker

White Clouds

White clouds may never rain!
They only float across the sky lazily!
Dark clouds rain giving wetness to the ground
Thunder thrills the earth.
Lightning lights up the sky
The sea greets dark clouds with folded arms.
When those pure white balls of cotton
skim across the blue sky
Its a lovely sight we see!
Makes you stand and stare.
Where else would you find such beauty in whiteness?

Ayyappa Paniker

Zorba Sings

Zorba is singing

He dances
He drinks wine
He sings again
Plays on the santoori
With his hand on the shoulder of the twilight hour
Zorba sings

He drinks wine
He sings again
Inhaling the scent
Of the night's breast
He drinks
Zorba is dancing

Smear'd all over
With the fresh hue of the dawn
Zorba drinks
He frisks and pranks
With the different wines
Of the different isles
Zorba sings
Plays on the santoori
Athens is singing
Sparta is singing
Lesbos is singing
Delphi too is singing
All the islands
Are dancing
The Mediterranean
Is drinking wine
Climbing over the waves
The little breeze swims
Zorba is singing

No colour of virtue
No stain of sin
Zorba sings

Gone are the Turks
Gone are the Romans
Gone are the Persians
Gone are the Germans
Who will come next
Is not known
Whoever comes
We shall drive him out
We shall keep
To the path of truth
Crying so, possessed,
Zorba sings

When it grows dark
He plays on the santoori
He dances
He drinks wine

Zorba is singing

Ayyappa Paniker