

SHORT STORY

SUJAATHA (Translated from Tamil by V. Surya)

Coeexisting peacefully on the walls were notices and advertisements of all sorts in letters a foot high: 'Nizam Lady tobacco', 'Beware the Flames of Revolution!', 'A.K. Cut-body Bras', 'Haji Moosa Textile Emporium---Sea of Fabrics', 'On 30-9-1973 All Infidels Will Shoulder Urns of Fire'.

An ordinary day in Madurai. As always, water pots stood in devout rows before the municipal taps, performing austerities for the sake of humans. Little boys were playing in the dirt without worrying in the least about tetanus. From the rear ends of buses run by the Pandian Transport Corporation issued a mixture of patriotic messages and diesel fumes. Wearing stiffly starched pants, policemen on protein-deficient diets were regulating the human and vehicular traffic that was darting about hither and thither. The city's inhabitants seemed to be in a state of what the physicists call Brownian motion. Along the left side of the street crept a thin and not very long khadi-shirted procession, scolding the government for the rise in prices. People without chappals, wearing tucked-up 'box-tied' veshtis...the petrified towers of the Meenakshi temple...the bridge across the dried-up Vaigai...Madurai! Madurai!, the ancient seat of Tamil culture, known to the ancient Greeks as Medora.

Our story is about a woman who has arrived in the city today. Valliammaa is waiting in the OP (outpatients) department of the big hospital in Madurai with her daughter Paapaathi. Yesterday Paapaathi contracted fever. She was taken to the village primary health care centre, where the doctor frightened them, saying, 'Take her at once to the big hospital.' They had taken the early morning bus.

Paapaathi lay inert on the stretcher, surrounded by six doctors. She might have been twelve years old. The cheap glass-stones on both sides of her pierced nose glistened in the bright light of the hospital. On her forehead was a line of sacred ash.

From what could be seen of her arms, covered as she was up the chest, they were thin as two sticks. She was in a feverish sleep. Her mouth was open.

Big Doctor examined her head by turning it with his hands. He examined the eyes by pushing up the eyelids. He examined the cheeks by pressing them with one finger, and the skull by feeling it with all his fingers. Big Doctor had been educated in the West. A professor. Those surrounding him were his medical students. He announced in English: 'Acute case of meningitis. Notice the...'

During that unintelligible discussion Valliamma gazed helplessly at her daughter. One by one the persons in the circle came forward and looked into the girl's eyes with the aid of an ophthalmoscope. They flashed a torch into them to see if they moved. They took down notes. Big Doctor said, 'Get her admitted.'

Valliamma looked from one face to another. One of them said, 'Look here, amma. This girl must be admitted into the hospital at once. Do you see that old person sitting there? Go to him. Where is your chit?'

Valliamma did not have a chit. 'Okay. He'll give you one. Ayya, you there! Come here, sir!' Valliamma looked at Big Doctor and asked, 'Ayya, will the child be all right?'

'First admit her. We'll take care of it. Doctor Dhanasekharan! I'll handle this case myself.' Then in English he said, 'I have to take a class. I'll see her as soon as I return.'

Like a minister followed by his retinue, he walked off with the rest of them scurrying after him. Dr. Dhanasekharan gave instructions to Seenivaasan. Then he hastened after Big Doctor.

Seenivaasan looked at Valliamma. 'Come here, 'ma! What's your name? Dei, you Death's Customer! Bring that register, will you?'

'Valliamma.' 'Patient's name?' he asked, using the English word. 'He is dead, 'nga.' Seenivaasan looked up. 'Patient' means a sick person...Who's to be admitted?' 'My daughter, 'nga.' 'Name?' 'Valliamma, 'nga.' 'What? Fooling around, huh? You daughter's name!' 'Paapaathi.' 'Paapaathi---at last! Here, take this chit. If you go straight on, near the staircase there'll be a chair and a person sitting on it. He checks incomes. Give it to him.' 'The child, 'nga?' 'Nothing's going to happen to the child. Let her just lie there...isn't there

---Editor, Literature Page

We are all trapped in history. The Europeans came to trade, hung on to fight, intrigue and conquer, and stayed on to instruct. Their colonies became vast markets for their textiles and their language. Conversions followed, to another way of life and on occasions to Christianity. When they went back they left their language behind -- and half-castes. In an alien land, language itself turns brown and half-caste. English was introduced in India with commercial objectives in view. What was achieved was something much greater in dimensions. Colonial history shows that language can be as domineering as any occupational army. It supplants myths, whole iconographies, world-view, ideologies. It ushers in its own symbols, and its own values. An armada of new texts sails in. Old dogmas and bigotries are swept away--and exchanged for new ones. You cannot choose your generation, your parents or your language, even a foreign one at times. If your father teaches English and you have three thousand books in the house, all in the same language, you have precious few options. To become fully conscious of writing in the language of one's

erstwhile colonial rulers, one must cross various thresholds of realization. To put it simplistically, a child thinks through language and feels through experience. The first school I entered was called Sacred Hearts. But World War II was raging, the Italian fathers next door were under house arrest, and even a string or two of barbed wire had sprung up around the school. Not the right type of atmosphere for a growing boy, my father thought. So I got transplanted to an Arya school, quite a different kettle of fish, really. Many of the boys came from a different social stratum. Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit were given as much importance as English, and rightly so. The pronunciation of the school masters and the students bordered on the atrocious. My fluency (so called) in English was greeted with derisive laughter. Just because the grammar was correct, and the diction not too awful, one became an object of mockery. The next threshold was crossed when one encountered boys from public schools. These were situated in the mountain sanctuaries of Murree and Simla and Nainital. The boys wore blue blazers and school

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anybody with you? You go anyway...Next! Who's Viyayarangam?' Valliamma was unhappy about leaving Paapaathi. The queue of patients, and the smell, churned her stomach. She felt furious with her dead husband. She took the chit and went ahead. The chair was empty, with grime on its back. She showed the chit to a person nearby. Going on with his writing, he glanced at it with a quarter of his left eye. 'Wait, 'ma. Let him come,' he said, pointing to the empty chair. Valliamma again felt the urge to go to her daughter. Within her uneducated heart, the problem, should I wait here, or go to the child? stretched out to the ends of the earth. She was too afraid to ask. Please, will it take a very long time?

The man in charge of evaluating incomes came along at a leisurely pace, after having had his nephew admitted to the hospital. He seated himself, raised a pinch of snuff three times to his nose, twisted his kerchief into a rope, rubbed it up and down both nostrils, and became energetic. 'Now look here! Got to stand in line. If you come flying at me like a swarm of moths in the monsoon, how can anything be done?' After Valliamma had waited thirty minutes, the chit she held out was grabbed from her. 'Go and get a signature from the doctor. There's no doctor's signature at all this!'

'Where to go for that?' 'Where did you come from?' 'From Munaand-Patti 'nga!' 'Huth!' said the clerk scornfully. He laughed. 'Munaandi-Patti? Here, bring that chit!' she gave him the chit again. He turned it and waved it like a fan. 'What's your husband's income?' 'Don't have a husband, 'nga.' 'What's your income?' She gave him an uncomprehending stare. 'How many rupees do you earn in a month?' 'When I do harvesting, I get paid in paddy. Or millet-rice, or ragi.' 'Not in rupees? Okay, okay. I'll put it down as ninety rupees.'

'In a month?' 'Don't worry. They won't charge you. Here, take this chit and go straight on, turn left---the bum-wiping hand, turn that way. There'll be an arrow sign. Go to room number 48.'

Valliamma received the note in both hands, humbly. The clues given by the clerk having further perplexed her simple mind, she wandered about in the hospital corridors like a piece of paper floating upon the wind. She did not know how to read. The number 48 had slithered from her memory as soon as it was put in it, and she was afraid to go back and ask that clerk once again.

Two patients went by on a single stretcher, each partly sitting and partly lying down, with tubes inserted in their noses. A big, wide-mouthed vessel of *sambar*-and-rice was being pushed along in a cart. White caps were to be seen everywhere. Elegantly dressed women doctors walked by in white coats, garlanded with stethoscopes. Policemen and nurses and bearers of coffee tumblers strode about in all directions. They were all in a hurry. She

like me, multi-lingual.

Exiles come to alien shores and write in the language of their adopted country. Joseph Conrad, Arthur Koestler, Nabokov are examples. An Indian writing poetry in English was an exile in his own country.

The handicaps were all too apparent. One is not merely speaking of an exclusive readership. Isn't poetry restricted to a class with a certain educational background? It could be said that 7000 miles and quite a few years separated the Indian writer from the 'living speech' of the language. But didn't millions speak English in India? Wasn't it at least the second language of most educated Indians? It was the language of the bank and the stock exchange, of the Parliament, the secretariat and the law courts. The writer was at home with it. What I am trying to refer to is the difficulties in writing poetry itself. You stuck to the straight and narrow path of textual English. You cut out linguistic heroics and hesitated taking liberties with the language. It was tough enough mastering (if that's the word) the idiom. To now start fragmenting it, chopping up the grammar and entering the slippery realm of the disjunctive seemed an unthinking indulgence. Sound, as poets know, is vital to poetry. At times I hesitated in giving a full phonetic charge to my verse unless the meaning was crystal clear and each line as a unit made sense.

Yet instinctively, one knew what to exclude: words like 'deliverance' and 'renunciation', expressions like 'the wondrous mysteries of the divine', 'the oneness of Brahma', 'the stream of life', the self (both the small guy starting with an 's' in the lower

was afraid to stop any of them to ask---what? She didn't even know what to ask. People were standing in a crowd before one of the doors. A man stood there collecting chits of brown paper like hers. She handed him hers, and he took it without paying it any attention. Everyone was waiting on the bench outside. Anxiety about Paapaathi returned to Valliamma: the girl's all by herself over there! The chit-collector called out the names one by one and made people sit in a row. When Paapaathi's name came up, he looked at the chit. 'So you've gone and brought her here! Here, take it!' he said, giving it back to her. 'Go straight ahead.'

'Ayya, I don't know the place, 'nga,' she said. He thought a bit and called to someone passing by, 'Amalraaj! Show this lady to number 48, 'ya...Go right behind this person. He's going right there.' She had to run after Amalraaj. There, on another bench, another crowd had gathered. Someone took her chit from her. Not having eaten anything, and also because of the smell of the hospital Valliamma felt a little dizzy. Half an hour later she was summoned into the room. Two individuals sat facing each other, writing with pencil-and-paper. One of them looked at her chit, turned it over and examined it, tilted it and looked again.

'You've come from the OP department?' to this question she was unable to give an answer. 'It's written here, admit the patient. Now there's no bed vacant. Come tomorrow morning at exactly seven-thirty. Okay?'

'Where have I got to come, 'nga?' 'Right here. Come straight here, okay.' When she emerged from that room, Valliamma's worry about her daughter, whom she had left all alone for almost a whole hour and a half, grew very great. All the rooms in the hospital seemed alike. The same person appeared to be sitting in every one of the rooms, again and again. In one ward several people were lying with their arms and legs raised up and tied with clamps. In another, tiny infants lay in a row, faces screwed up, crying. What with all the machines, and the patients, and the doctors everywhere, she lost her way again.

'Amma! she called out to a woman doctor, and described the place she had been to earlier. 'There were lots of doctors talking together. They asked my income---said I don't have to pay anything. I've left my child there, amma!'

She took the route told to her by the woman. There she found a locked gate. At that, her fear changed to panic. She began to cry. standing there, right in the middle of the hospital, she cried and cried. One man told her to step out of the way and cry. Her crying must have seemed perfectly ordinary to everybody, like the aseptic odour of the place.

'Paapaathi! Paapaathi! Where am I going to see you? Where'll I go?' she kept saying, as she walked on. Somewhere to the side she saw a doorway. They had kept it open to allow people only to come out. That doorway she remembered seeing.

She came out. It was from there that she had walked that long distance

and entered another doorway. That was how she had entered. She recalled it now. She ran that way and reached another doorway, and remembered the wooden stairs. There it stood---the chair of the man who had enquired what her income was.

That was the place! But the entrance was closed. Through it she could see inside. There in a corner, with her eyes closed, lay Paapaathi, still on that stretcher. 'There! Ayya, open the door a little, please! My girl's over there!' 'Come exactly at three o'clock. Now all "close".' For ten minutes she implored him. She did not understand the language he spoke, though it was Tamil all right. She did not understand the questions he asked...He let someone else through, and in a gesture of pious gratitude was just pressing to his eyes some coins they had slipped him, when she pushed past him in the way just cleared. Rushing in and gathering her daughter up in her arms, she sat down on an empty bench and wept.

When Big Doctor had finished taking the class for the MD students, he had a cup of coffee. Then he went to the ward. He remembered very well the meningitis case he had seen that morning. He had read recently in the British Medical Journal about certain new drugs.

'That meningitis case I told you to admit this morning---that twelve-year-old girl. Where is she?' 'But nobody was admitted today, Doctor.'

'What! Not admitted? But I told you specifically! Dhanasekharan! Don't you remember it?' 'I remember it, Doctor.' 'Paul! Just go and find out about it. How could it be missed?' the person addressed as Paul went straight down the corridor and made enquiries of the clerks sitting opposite each other. 'Where, 'ya? You people simply write "Admit! Admit!" But there's not even any standing space in the ward!' 'For God's sake! It's the Chief asking!' 'Is it somebody he knows?' 'Could be. How would I know?' 'No twelve-year-old girl has come to our side. Even if anyone did come, I have told them to return tomorrow at seven-thirty. Tonight one or two beds will fall vacant. You should inform us in advance if it's an emergency! Or at least drop a word that the Big Man has an interest in the case! Any relation of his?'

Valliamma did not know what she was going to do till seven-thirty the next morning. The hospital environment made her dreadfully afraid. She did not know if they would allow her to be with her daughter. She thought about it. Then she picked up her daughter, held her close to her breast, rested the head on her shoulder, and with Paapaathi's arms and legs dangling loosely, she emerged from the hospital. Clambering into a yellow cycle rickshaw, she told the driver to go to the bus-stand.

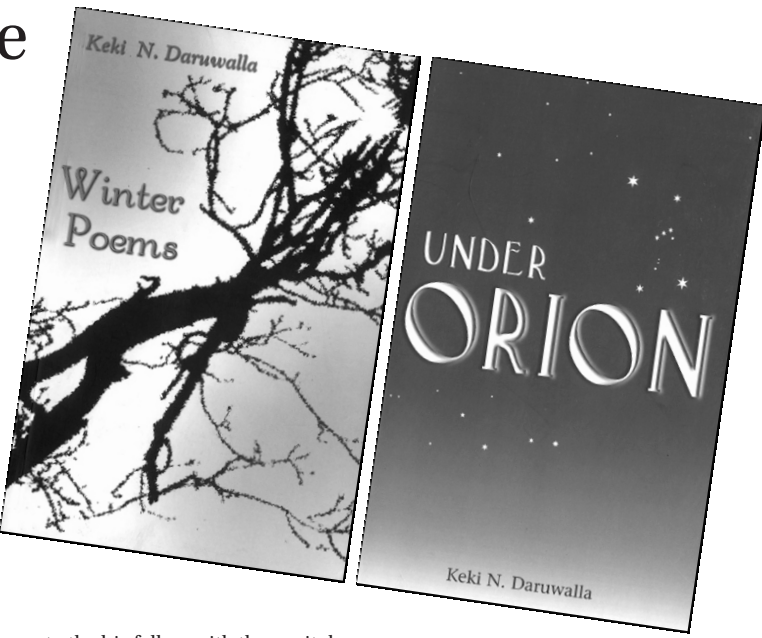
'What nonsense!' shouted Big Doctor, in English. 'Tomorrow? At seven-thirty? By that time that girl will be dead and gone, ayya! Doctor Dhanasekhar, you go yourself and search for that case in the OP department. It must be there! If there isn't a vacant bed in this wretched ward, there is one in our department. See that she is given one! Quick!'

'Doctor! That bed has been kept reserved!' 'I don't care. I want that girl admitted now, right now!' The Boss had never before shouted like that, in English, or even in Tamil. The terrified Doctor Dhanasekharan, Paul, and Miranda the Head Nurse, all ran to the OP department in search of Valliamma.

'It's just a fever, after all. We'll just quietly go back to Munaandi-Patti. We can show her to the medicine man, we don't have to go to the hospital in the big village at all. That doctor is the very one who scared us and drove us to Madurai...It will be all right. We'll tie a white cloth poultice, have a mantra chanted over some vibhuti...We'll have it done.'

As the cycle rickshaw neared the bus-stand, Valliamma prayed, 'If Paapaathi becomes all right, I'll give an offering of two handfuls of coins to the Vaidheeswaran temple.'

Sujaatha is a short story writer in Tamil who has published extensively in literary little magazines. V. Surya is a well-known translator of Tamil novels and short stories. The short story published above reflects the shift in focus for the Tamil short story from the late sixties onward, from what was described as 'noble idealism' to a newer expression emphasized by strong story line, well-defined narrative and sharp social criticism.



case to the big fellow with the capital 'S') all talk of *moksha*, (liberation) and *maya* (appearance)', all reference to infinity and eternity and expressions like 'the womb of the void' or 'the void of the womb' -- have it any way you please. I avoided them like the plague. Not once, as far as I recollect, have I talked of the soul in a poem. It was by a conscious act of will. The stranglehold over the soul, this monopoly over the spiritual enjoyed by the earlier well-meaning savants who passed off as philosophers, and the present batch of crooks who masquerade as godmen, is one of the intellectual scandals of this century.

Instinctively one made language slightly subversive to content. Those who think that the form is the poem would not take kindly to this. Literature concerns itself with the

**Since then Daruwalla has, in his own words, written an entire poem on Maya! --- an act that however should not invalidate the main lines of his argument here.*

bear on a theme was not enough. The poem had to be securely fastened to an Indian setting; should seek freshly upturned earth under a monsoon downpour. Most, if not all of this, worked unconsciously within me. With hindsight, that is the only way I can explain my almost fierce commitment to place, site, landscape. (Not just in my poems but also in my stories, where I take great care to set the scene first, almost like a director visualizing the stage for a play). In my first book, *Under Orion*, one entire section was devoted to life in the marshlands (the *terai*). Another book dealt with the Ganga at Benares and with the purificatory myth of the river.

At the same time one could not close one's eyes to the filth at the ghats of Benares and the seeming chaos, the miasma of funeral pyres going up in flames a few yards from unconcerned pilgrims bathing in the river, offering obeisance to the rising sun. I accepted the notion that its swirling waters cleansed one of his sins. But I could not shut my eyes to what was happening in front of me. This is where we come back to language. For languages erect their own outposts of sensibility -- not that you can easily marshal arguments to support this kind of nebulous statement. Nor had this kind of perception anything to do with a colonial hangover (though critics might believe otherwise). One saw squalor and chaos for what they were. They registered themselves on the cornea. No alibis are needed here.

In university one had been

brought up on a diet of Shelley and Keats. When you left the campus you faced harsh reality around you -- drought, poverty and communal riots. One needed a harsh language, words with a saw-edge, words which rasped and got into you like the shards of a broken bottle. Slowly, almost unconsciously the poems developed a vocabulary and a soundscape of their own.

The question of patois comes up often, of the Indian contribution to the English language. Some of these experiments (in prose) have been very successful, for instance G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatter* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, both recognized as minor classics today. Novels are one thing, verse another. We have had no such triumphs in poetry. Admitted that the Indian has his own way with English syntax, but it is no way comparable to the Caribbean patois. The Indian way of speaking English is to mix the languages -- half a sentence in English and the other tattered half in Hindi or Marathi or Bengali. Writing in that manner could bring on numerous problems. Pidgin is fine but a half-Hindi-half-English amalgam becomes impractical.

Finally, while the poet endeavours to hone the language to his purpose, language also has a way with his poetry. If you have wielded an oriental scimitar all your life, you are used to whirling it about, making fearful whistling arcs in the air and generally slashing around. But give the same man a straight bladed sword and willy-nilly, given some time, he will learn to thrust and stab.

Keki Daruwalla was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry in 1978.