The Abyss

Pothivelu Pandaram is known as a successful and God-fearing man about town – he has a loyal wife, three daughters and ample money to pay for their dowries. However, it is an open secret that his success is fuelled by a tawdry yet deeply profitable trade – for he owns a group of physically deformed beggars and places them outside various temples to make money for him. The beggars are mere 'items' to Pandaram, hardly human, to be bought and sold like cattle. But when the novel descends right into their world – the world of the 'abyss' – and places the reader in their midst, it takes on a marvellous, unexpected turn.

Bitter, black, raw and yet laced with humour and tenderness, *The Abyss* (*Ezhaam Ulagam*) is one of the most acclaimed works of the great Tamil writer Jeyamohan. It was adapted into an acclaimed film in 2009 called *Naan Kadavul* (*I am God*) which won a National Film Award for its director. Written with an unflinching eye and suffused with a deep existential longing, it is an extraordinary novel – in its terrain, its fundamental questions about humanity and its depiction of human suffering and liberation.

Praise for the Tamil original (*Ezhaam Ulagam*)

'The novel is quite subtle in its treatment of human psychology . . . it writes itself. The characters in this novel tell their own stories through their dialogue.' **A. Muttulingam, veteran Tamil writer**

'The title *Ezhaam Ulagam* [*The Abyss*] might make the reader think this is a novel about a faraway netherworld, deep in the abysses of hell. But the novel points out that this world is actually all around us, a part of our everyday life, the dark side of our own reality.' **Paavannan, Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer and translator**

The Abyss

The Abyss

Jeyamohan

An English translation of *Ezhaam Ulagam*

Translated from the Tamil by
Suchitra Ramachandran

juggernaut

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This book is dedicated
to Tamil writer Jeyakanthan, with love

– Jeyamohan

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Author's Note
[From the Tamil Original]

Some years back, when I was speaking at an event in Tiruvannamalai, I mentioned that I had once been a beggar in the same city. My friends were shocked. They couldn't imagine me that way. 'We don't pay attention to beggars,' I said in that speech. 'We give them a little something and hastily move away. We want to avoid them. But if you stop and pay attention to them, you will come to see how vast their world is. In fact, a significant portion of Tiruvannamalai's population is made up of beggars.'

In 1981, when I was nineteen years old, I ran away from home. Although I had intentions of renouncing the world and becoming an ochre-robed samiyar, I returned in a few months. But I could not stay at home either, and so I set out again. This time I went to Tiruvannamalai and Pazhani, where I spent a few months living among beggars as one of them. My novel *Ezhaam Ulagam* [*The Abyss*] took root from those experiences.

In 2003, I had already written a novel called *Kaadu* [*The Forest*]. It is considered as one of the most lyrical novels written

in Tamil. One day, I was on my way to work when I happened to catch a glimpse of something, perhaps a face, on the road. It was only a momentary glimpse, but deep inside I was shaken. My thoughts took flight, wandered. Once more I was in Pazhani, where I was a beggar living amidst other beggars.

The face that surfaced from those memories was Ramappan's. Ramappan was afflicted with leprosy; he is also one of the greatest human beings I have ever met, full of grace, love and a sense of justice. The face I had seen on the road had reminded me of him. I felt a compelling urge to write about him.

I immediately started writing the novel and finished it in just five days. The novel went on sale a few days afterwards, at the Chennai Book Fair. Since then, *Ezhaam Ulagam* continues to be read widely in Tamil.

While many writers today write about the lives of marginalized people, this novel talks about the people existing beyond the margins of society. Seven underworlds are described in Hindu mythology – athalam, vithalam, nithalam, kapasthimal, mahathalam, suthalam and padhalam. I called this novel *Ezhaam Ulagam* – literally, 'The Seventh Underworld'; that is the unfathomable abyss the people of this novel inhabit.

It is a world that is right next to us, but we never see it. It doesn't come into our vision at all. When this novel was published, many people came up to me and asked if such a world really exists. 'You only have to make a trip to Sabarimalai to find out,' I told them. 'There, all the way up the mountain, a man lies outside the temple. He has no arms and no legs, and he begs for money. How did he get up there? There must be an organization to bring people up the hill,' I said. 'Moreover, it

must be a profitable enterprise, otherwise they wouldn't trade in human beings.'

Ever since the novel was published, readers have been sending me news articles about the world of disabled beggars depicted in the novel, and continue to do so. Such news was being published earlier too, but our readers hadn't noticed them then. This novel gave them the eyes to see. I think that is the unique contribution of this novel.

However, this is not a work that attempts to speak on behalf of the marginalized with revolutionary fervour. This is not a novel that advocates sympathy or humanitarianism. This novel was written by a man who was a beggar himself, who was a part of that society. It gives the reader the experience of being one of them. It allows the reader to live in the novel as a fellow beggar and makes him understand their jokes and games, their friendship, love and sorrow, their violence and their death – from the inside.

In 2009, I wrote the screenplay for a film called *Naan Kadavul* based on this novel. It was directed by the acclaimed filmmaker Bala and went on to win the National Film Award. Bala found his actors from the same world of disabled beggars depicted in *Ezhaam Ulagam*. A sixteen-year-old girl called Madhubala was part of the cast. However, she was developmentally disabled; her body had the growth of a five-year-old and her mind that of a three-year-old.

Madhubala ate nothing without first giving a bite of it to her 'anna', or elder brother. In reality, he was her younger brother, ten years her junior. If someone asked her for a bite of whatever she was eating, she would immediately give it to them with a smile. With her milky teeth, Madhubala had a very beautiful smile.

There was a simple reason why she gave away her food like that. Madhubala had never known hunger. In the world of beggars, all of them kept feeding her. Madhubala was a little angel in their midst.

When I was begging in Tiruvannamalai, Yogi Ram Surat Kumar, a well-known spiritual mystic, was a fellow beggar in my retinue. I did not know who he was then; it was much later that I formally met him. He always referred to himself in the third person, as 'this beggar'. The world of the beggars is at one end of the spectrum in our society, at the bottom of the abyss. But it is a world that curves around like a horseshoe, and in it live some of the greatest human possibilities of our society – mendicant samiyars, mystics, and spiritually realized jnanis. They have renounced the world as we know it and inhabit the same underworld as the beggars; people like them can live only there. Mangandi Samy in the novel too could only live there.

As an itinerant samiyar, I observed that there were many thousand ochre-robed samiyars and sannyasis wandering all over India. They were all begging. They had no identity. I now wonder if it is to them that this country truly belongs. Sankara begged, so did Vivekananda. My spiritual teacher, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, and his teacher Nataraja Guru, wandered all through India, begging for their living. In India, begging is often a prescribed part of the spiritual journey. Nitya Chaitanya Yati always had his begging bowl with him and received any donated money only as alms in the bowl.

An Indian writer very close to my heart is the Malayalam writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer; he was also a beggar once. He wrote that there is an India you discover only as a beggar.

I have discovered it in my own way. In all the days I wandered around this country, I never went without food for more than a meal at most. You can ask any woman for food in India. Not one will refuse you.

Nagercoil — Jeyamohan
15 January 2023

Translator's Note

In the winter of 2012, I was a twenty-four-year-old graduate student living in Pittsburgh, studying cognitive behaviour in monkeys by day and reading voraciously under the lamplight into the nights. I was making the most of the interlibrary loan programme offered by universities in the United States, where I could request for any book held by any library in the world. At that time, I was slowly getting weary of reading contemporary American literature, indeed any literature written originally in English. My gaze had turned inward; I wanted to discover my own roots. Soon I was wandering in the hinterlands of India, reading Bengali, Marathi and Kannada novels in English translation. Many translations were possible to source only because of the interlibrary loan programme. This was how I stumbled upon the hidden ground of modern Tamil literature.

I had grown up in Tamil Nadu, speaking Tamil at home, but read almost exclusively in English. Like most other English-reading Tamilians, I was familiar with three kinds of Tamil writing – classical Tamil literature (like the Thirukkural and Silappathikaram), the politically charged rhetoric that came out of the Dravidian movement (like the writings of C.N. Annadurai

and M. Karunanidhi), and the period romances and racy thrillers that filled the pages of Tamil pop-culture magazines (like Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*). There was a fourth kind of Tamil writing that I knew nothing about, and it was this kind with which I was just beginning to acquaint myself through translations. It was modern Tamil literature.

Modern Tamil literature is a hundred-year-old phenomenon that had its beginnings with Subramania Bharati and Pudhumaipithan in the 1920s and 1930s. Till the advent of the internet, it was something of a closely guarded secret. Mostly published in little magazines and read by a few thousand readers in the Tamil-speaking parts of the world, modern Tamil literature bears the influence of global literary movements and includes creative works in all sorts of genres, from urban realism to symbolist poetry to science fiction. It has birthed such diverse writers as Ashokamitran, a modernist master of short fiction, and Jeyakanthan, a fiery, original thinker firmly rooted in the Tamil literary and philosophical ethos (this novel, incidentally, is dedicated to him). While the style and sensibility of these works are modern and the lives they depicted grounded in the Tamil milieu, their issues and concerns are universal.

It was this sort of creative Tamil literature that I attempted to read for the first time when I was twenty-four, through English translations. As I discovered writers new and old, I was awestruck; I felt I had been initiated into a secret society. This was the kind of writing I had been looking for – rooted in the Tamil landscape, but modern, irreverent, questioning, humanistic. I had grown up reading almost exclusively in English, and nothing in the English media had cued me in to the fact that there was a thriving underground intelligentsia in Tamil.

I soon realized that a major reason for this was the lack of good English translations. Most of the titles I came across had never been translated into English; some of the translations that did exist did not satisfy me. However, unlike Bengali or Marathi – languages I didn't speak and couldn't read – Tamil was my mother tongue. I could speak it well and read it adequately. So I started hunting the libraries of the world for works of modern Tamil literature, but now in the Tamil original. That was how Sundara Ramasamy's *Oru Puliyamarathin Kadhai* (*The Tale of a Tamarind Tree*) came home from a university library in California. Thi. Janakiraman's *Amma Vandhal* (Mother Came) arrived from Canada. And Jeyamohan's *Purappadu* (Departure) landed in the winter of 2013, making the leap across the ocean from India. The last book took my breath away – just a few pages in, I knew I was reading something very, very unusual, by a very, very unusual writer.

Bahuleyan Pillai Jeyamohan had run away from home three times, all before the age of twenty-three. The first time was in 1981, when he was nineteen, when the suicide of a close friend had disturbed him so much that he could no longer stay at home. Inspired by the biographies of itinerant monks (known as sannyasis or samiyars) he had read in his boyhood, Jeyamohan donned ochre robes and left home. Although he was very young and not formally initiated as a monk, his ochre robes earned him the respectful moniker of 'samy' among the people. He travelled all over India on trains and buses, seldom purchasing a ticket, doing odd jobs from time to time, begging when there was nothing else to do. *Purappadu* is a set of personal essays filled with anecdotes from those wandering years and peopled by similar travellers and outsiders as the author. It is set in

the wintry Himalayas, in Kasi by the Ganga, and in the dry hinterlands of India.

I was particularly struck by *Purappadu*, firstly because the scenes and the people featured in that book were simultaneously familiar and wholly novel to me. It reintroduced my own land to me. I had grown up in a temple town – Madurai – myself, and I had seen many dreadlocked, bearded samiyars in ochre sitting with their begging bowls by the temple, their bold, careless eyes sweeping over the passers-by. As a young girl, I was told that they were outsiders, to be revered but always kept at arm's length. However, they always intrigued me, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the warnings. Perhaps it was the utter freedom in their eyes that appealed to me, a freedom that I longed for and which was unavailable to me, a freedom obtained for the price of the many hidden dangers that stepping outside society, I was told, would bring with it. Through *Purappadu,* for the first time, I entered their world, seeing things I would never have otherwise seen.

Second, the perspective of the book was very different from anything I had read about India until then. It was written by someone who had travelled the length and breadth of the country, but not as an outsider judging everything he sees with an academic eye. The author as narrator in *Purappadu* is only an observing eye. Even when our attention is drawn to his presence, we are reminded that he is also a wanderer, a traveller, just like all the people he meets on his journey, with his own private suffering to make sense of.

Third, the book was written with the shadow of death on it. The author becomes a wandering beggar because he is haunted by existential questions and he can no longer stay home and

lead a normal life. Life weighs down on him. These existential feelings colour all his observations. *Purappadu* is thus not just a travelogue, not just fiction, but a modern work in the spirit of Dante's *Inferno* – a fiction-laced narrative of a personal, interior journey.

But as I finished the book, I realized that it also was a very Indian tale at its core. For over two thousand five hundred years, India has had a thriving network of sannyasis and samiyars, all of whom have 'departed' from home and society in order to find answers to humanity's burning questions. What is the meaning of life? Why do humans suffer? Is there any reprieve to our longing for release? Such fires, once lit in the head, push a man out of the home and into the world; he departs to become a seeker. The Buddha, too, had his moment of purappadu. He left home and wandered in order to seek an answer to the fundamental question of human suffering. India's gymnosophists, or 'naked philosophers', were found wandering as far away as in Greece and Egypt in the early parts of the first millennium. *Purappadu* takes its light from the spirit of that tradition.

Much of Jeyamohan's fiction has these eternal questions burning within. A reader often gets the impression that Jeyamohan is not so much a storyteller of our times as he is a quasi-historical, even mythical figure, a pauranika, who just happens to be passing through our times. He is a classicist in the tradition of Ilango and Kamban; his stories are often based on historical and mythological themes. His first major novel, *Vishnupuram*, is a historical epic set in a fantastical fictional temple town; its major characters, drawn from various walks of life, are all restless seekers in their own way. So, when I came across *Ezhaam Ulagam* for the first time, I was prepared for something

different, a social novel perhaps, a harsh tale of gritty realism. But as I read the novel, I realized that while the form and the setting had changed, Jeyamohan's central preoccupations had not. In fact, by anchoring the plot and characters solidly on the ground of realism, the author had managed to evoke the sense of suffering and desire for release that invisibly permeates our everyday existence. That, I felt, was the genius of this novel, and it was one of the main reasons I was motivated to translate it.

The Abyss (*Ezhaam Ulagam* in Tamil) is a novel that is in many ways a spiritual successor to *Purappadu*. Like *Purappadu*, *The Abyss* also came out of Jeyamohan's experiences during his itinerant years. A major part of the novel is set in Pazhani, one of the two temple towns where Jeyamohan lived as a begging mendicant during his third foray out of home (the other temple town was Tiruvannamalai). Unlike *Purappadu*, *The Abyss* is entirely fiction, although the novel draws many of its major characters from people the author observed in real life.

Critics have noted that the line between fact and fiction is often blurred in Jeyamohan's works. He writes non-fictional essays using the narrative tools of fiction; he freely borrows characters and incidents from real life and weaves fictional narratives around them. However, despite the novel's characters being drawn from real life, right from the beginning we are struck by the distance of fiction in *The Abyss*. We feel the distance, I think, because we are initially horrified by the descriptions of the beggars, their gross physical deformities and the sufferings they are made to endure. It is all taken from real life. But, despite the searing realism with which they are depicted, the characters are so far away from *our* everyday life that they strike us as alien. We look upon them as outsiders; we approach the world of the novel

hesitantly, nervously, as one would approach strange beings on another planet.

However, something remarkable happens as we continue reading the novel. We slowly find ourselves crawling right into the world of the disabled beggars. At some point we find ourselves sitting with them on the stone steps at Pazhani, just as the author might have in his youth. We laugh with them, eat with them, smoke with them, and we realize at one point that there is no 'we' and no 'them' any more. It is a moment of great freedom. When we discover the beggar in ourselves, we simultaneously see our human self mirrored in everyone around us.

The Abyss is a novel about human suffering; it depicts suffering at all grades of human life. The beggars suffer their wretched existence; their owner Pandaram suffers in his own way. Children and adults, men and women, each has his or her own suffering to endure. However, it is also a novel about the human spirit's capacity for freedom. There could be freedom, the novel suggests, in humour, in fellowship, in music, in intellect, in love. But even these notes are struck with black humour. A character who is something of an intellectual is relegated to sitting on a stool supporting his swollen testicles. A literally spineless woman is lauded as Kannagi, the legendary character famed for her wifely subservience and chastity. Another character whose fingers and toes are tragically all eaten away by leprosy possesses an extraordinary aesthetic sensibility.

Then there are moments of great human tenderness in the novel – the blind character Thorappu's struggle to touch his infant son, for example, or Pandaram's resolution to fulfil his little daughter's wishes in the middle of the night. If the wretched fate of Muthammai is at the omega point of the novel,

its alpha point is realized in the character of Mangandi Samy, whose divine, sculpture-like smile and songs of longing remain with us for a long time. It is in Mangandi Samy's songs that we hear the human cry for release, the possibility of liberation. There is an immense sense of empathy in his songs. Juxtaposed against the gross depictions of human suffering in the novel, the resounding tones of his songs are powerful and haunting, like an unveiled cry of the soul.

The sensibility of *Ezhaam Ulagam* is thus something highly unusual. It is bitter, black, raw, yet redemptive in its outlook. While the novel evinces a Schopenhauerian pessimism towards the nature of life in general, it simultaneously reveals the essential nobility of man, the cry of his soul longing for release. This is a sensibility rarely found in modern Indian fiction, but one that is not new to us: for instance, it reminds us of the poetry of nineteenth-century mystic Lalon Fakir in Bengal that inspired Rabindranath Tagore.

In 2009, Tamil filmmaker Bala made a National Award-winning film called *Naan Kadavul* (I Am God) based on *Ezhaam Ulagam*. The music was scored by Ilayaraja. While the film is not a direct adaptation of the book, both the film and its music reflect the spirit and sensibility of the novel, and have gone on to become cult classics. Bringing this novel into English is also, thus, a way of renewing interest in this kind of sensibility, this particular mode of seeing life and the place of humanity in it.

When I discovered modern Tamil literature in Pittsburgh in the winter of 2012, I had no ambitions of translating anything myself; I was just happy to read through my new-found stack. It was only in 2016, mildly surprised by the dearth of English

translations all around, did I venture to translate something – Jeyamohan's short story *Periyammavin Sorkkal* (Periyamma's Words). It was a delightful tale about words and meanings, a meta-story about translation itself. To my utter surprise, it won the *Asymptote*'s Fiction Translation Prize for 2017. This gave me the confidence to continue translating other works. While I have been working on other projects since then, *The Abyss* is my first published full-length work of translation.

This translation was commissioned by veteran Tamil writer A. Muttulingam. When he requested me to translate this novel, I was initially hesitant. There were two technical challenges. First, *Ezhaam Ulagam* is a novel deeply rooted in its cultural landscape. There are minute descriptions of Murugan temples, the festival of Thai Poosam, its kavadi-bearing pilgrim culture and the community of the flower-stringer Pandarams. There are also rich descriptions of the loose community of beggars, mendicants and itinerants who live outside society, known variously as samiyars, sannyasis, pandarams and paradesis. These descriptions are full of words like 'thiruvodu' and 'annakkavadi', words which have no direct English equivalent. Thus, translating this novel would mean translating an entire cultural landscape for the English reader.

Second, Jeyamohan's Tamil prose is often considered incredibly hard to translate. This is particularly true when he veers into dialect. *Ezhaam Ulagam*, set in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, is entirely written in a dialect that bears influences of both Tamil and Malayalam. Further, it is an incredibly polyphonic novel. It has a number of precisely etched characters, with the story told for the most part through just their dialogues. The idiosyncrasies of each character – their

place of origin, caste, gender, social status – are all brought out through their speech. The characters communicate using slang, wordplay, puns, proverbs, snatches of film songs and other pop-culture references. Even the names of many characters are subtle cultural allusions. Mangandi Samy's name immediately evokes in the mind of the informed Tamil reader the line '*maangai paal undu malaimel irupporkku thengai paal edhukkadi*'. This is a line from a popular siddharpaadal by Kudhambai Siddhar; only the very select reader familiar with the Tamil siddhar tradition is privy to the meaning of the song. The novel is peppered with many, many such allusions. I felt as if I was tasked with the equivalent of rendering James Joyce into Tamil.

However, these challenges posed interesting translation problems that I was eager to solve. Moreover, I was captivated by the novel's strangeness – its raw depiction of human life at the bleeding margins, rendered with black humour, empathy and compassion. I wanted to live in that unusual world for a few months. So I agreed to take on the task, and this book was the result.

In translating this novel, I have attempted to render the text in the form of a self-contained English novel, eschewing footnotes and folding the context and meaning of cultural terms organically into the text. My intention was for the English reader to inhabit the world of the novel without disruption. The original novel in Tamil is an immersive experience for the Tamil reader; I wanted to recreate the same effect. Preserving the local colour was important for creating such an experience for the reader. Hence, most of the novel culture-specific words the reader may encounter in the book – words like 'samiyar', 'pandaram', 'kavadi', etc. – are used as loanwords and explained as

and when they occur in the text. I hope that a careful reader will have no trouble following them. However, as an introduction, I attempt to provide some preliminary cultural context in the next few paragraphs, with the hope that it will help the reader to appreciate the novel's nuances better. A partial glossary is included at the end.

Much of the novel is set in Pazhani, a temple town located about 120 km north of Madurai. In Pazhani, there is a temple to the Hindu god Murugan atop the eponymous hill; the lord in the shrine there is called both Pazhaniyandavan and Pazhaniyandi. These names are a curious play on words: 'andavan' means lord, while 'andi' means 'beggar'. According to the local mythology of the temple, Murugan, after renouncing his family, stands on the hill in the garb of a beggar. In other tales, he is renowned as a warrior, as a lover, and as a god wise enough to instruct his own father in wisdom. But in Pazhani, he is a beggar. He is thus both Pazhaniyandavan and Pazhaniyandi – the Beggar-lord of the Pazhani Hill. How can a god be a beggar? Murugan's divine nature, it is said, emerges out of these paradoxical attributes.

The Murugan cult in Tamil Nadu is thought to have emerged from more ancient forms of worship – the frenzied adoration of the spear-wielding Velan of the hills; the reverent worship of a warlord endowed with extraordinary physical beauty, or Murugu; the exaltation of an ever-youthful young boy, Kumaran. Murugan is defined by his stature as a warrior god, his beauty and his eternal youth; he represents the perfect human form.

Pothivelu Pandaram, one of the main protagonists of the novel, goes to Pazhani for an annual festival called Thai Poosam. Thai Poosam, celebrated in the month of January, is an important day for devotees of Lord Murugan. On this day they fast, wear

ochre and go on walking pilgrimages to Murugan temples carrying kavadis. Fervent cries of 'Arohara!' punctuate their journey; devotees may sometimes dance in a frenzy with their kavadis. A kavadi is a semi-circular frame of wood or steel, some as heavy as thirty kilograms, decorated with coloured lengths of cloth, flowers and peacock feathers. Devotees make religious vows to 'bear' these 'burdens' as they proceed on their pilgrimage. Pilgrims typically balance the rod-like base pole of the kavadi on one shoulder as they climb uphill; the semicircular frame of the kavadi curves above their heads, giving the appearance of a peacock perched on their shoulders. Kavadis are a throwback to a past when devotees would take offerings to the lord in two baskets suspended on either side of a bamboo pole. (Beggars would carry a similar apparatus to receive food in; it was called 'annakkavadi'.) Over time, the baskets and offerings disappeared; today the kavadi is mostly a symbolic, ritual relic.

The protagonist Pothivelu Pandaram belongs to a caste of temple workers called Pandarams. Traditionally, they were flower-stringers at Murugan temples in Tamil Nadu; some sang hymns or performed other temple-related duties. They were Saivites. The word 'Pandaram' possibly shares origins with the northern word 'bhandar', meaning storehouse; perhaps they were temple custodians in the past.

The word 'Pandaram' is also used to refer to a Saivite mendicant in Tamil, typically wearing ochre with a string of thick, dark rudraksha beads about his neck and ash smeared on his forehead. The use of the word 'pandaram' to refer to a mendicant has given rise to phrases like 'pandaram-paradesi', where the word acquires a derogatory connotation – pandaram-paradesi has come to mean a common beggar. In the text, I differentiate the Pandaram