

Of Men, Women and Witches

Of Men, Women and Witches

Stories from My Life

Jeyamohan

An English translation of *Uravidangal*

Translated from the Malayalam by

Sangeetha Puthiyedath

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2025
Originally published in Malayalam as *Uravidangal* by
Mathrubhumi Books 2011

Copyright © Jeyamohan 2025
English translation copyright © Sangeetha Puthiyedath 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 978-93-5345-343-5
E-ISBN: 978-93-5345-844-7

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own. The facts contained herein were reported to be true as on the date of publication by the author to the publishers of the book, and the publishers are not in any way liable for their accuracy or veracity.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

*For Achan,
ardent, fervent traveller–storyteller*

Contents

<i>Translator's Note</i>	ix
1. Even Though	1
2. Nanjinadu – The Part of Kerala That Broke Off	65
3. Daughter, Mother, Woman	115
4. Signs Left Behind by Ancestors	175
5. The <i>Yakshis</i> of Nanjinadu	211
<i>Notes</i>	249
<i>Translator's Acknowledgements</i>	255
<i>A Note on the Author and Translator</i>	257

Translator's Note

'Whatever is here, is found elsewhere, but what is not here is nowhere else,' asserts Vyasa unequivocally in the 'Adi Parva' of the Mahabharata. Had the epic poet been aware of Jeyamohan's memoir, he would have been more circumspect! Here is a work that brings to our mind what a twenty-year-old Franz Kafka wrote to his childhood friend Oskar Pollack:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? ... we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief.

Translator's Note

As we move through the pages of Jeyamohan's *Of Men, Women and Witches (Uravidangal)*, we will be forced to remind ourselves that this is *not* a story; that the people we come across here *really* existed; that the events recounted here *really* happened. We come across a father who did not know how to love, whose unexpressed tenderness curdled within him, turned acidic and intolerably corrosive; a mother who lost her life swinging between inspiring dreams and a nightmarish reality; a grandmother who, deprived of the larger-than-life canvas she felt she deserved, wasted her life in the *chakra vyuha* of legal cases. The father, the mother and the grandmother whom we meet in the pages of this book defy easy description. They sear into us as people who left a burning trail in life, and that of a boy who survived the house of lac to quietly tell the tale.

This is not Jeyamohan's life story. If we approach it as the record of a linear progression of a life from childhood to adulthood, as lineaments of a portrait of the artist as a young man, we are bound to be disappointed. Running through the chronicles is an implicit quest for meaning, for measure, for purpose and love. Here the lines that divide life and art blur. More than a story, what we encounter here are scalding slivers of memory that will smart long after the book is read and set aside. It is also

Translator's Note

the story of a land and a people who no longer exist and can no longer be recognized. Fragments shored against the ruins of a forgotten history – harsh, haunting and unquestionably moving.

I remember how deeply the book affected me when I read it years ago for the first time. At that time, I had no inkling that I would try my hand at translating it one day! Slowly it dawned on me that these vignettes could provide valuable clues – even keys – to understanding the writer and his writing. How can one translate such a text? At first, the task appeared too daunting.

Jeyamohan's language is a deft amalgam of precision and poetry. The symbolic and the concrete seamlessly fuse. However, there are times when his ruminations slide into what is suggestive and elliptical, revealing glimpses of a complex interiority caught in a maze-like reality. The adamantine parts were snatches of folk sayings and conversations in obscure regional dialects! How to capture their plain import, let alone their distinctive flavour?

It has been observed that the word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. As a translator, one knows that even in the best instances a translation can only be an 'approximation' and not an exact reproduction, yet one forges ahead

Translator's Note

to bring forth what writers like Walter Benjamin and Alberto Manguel spelt out as its defining aspiration and objective. 'It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work,' advocates Benjamin. And Manguel reminds us that, 'It is in the translation that the innocence lost after the first reading is restored under another guise, since the reader is once again faced with a new text and its attendant mystery. That is the inescapable paradox of translation, and also its wealth.'

Effective translation does not happen because a translator is familiar with two languages, but rather because the translator is able to touch, albeit briefly, the mind of the writer. Translating this slim volume – the original work is merely 142 pages long, took me almost two years to complete. The content was demanding and often emotionally taxing. But the most challenging aspect was the difficulty in finding words that captured the essential spirit of the text, not just the meaning. I attempted to overcome this by not overtly focusing on what is literal, but on the implicit meaning – that is, the spirit and the flavour of the original as much as I could. Sometimes even this was difficult for there were

Translator's Note

no accurate equivalent expressions in English for certain terms and words. In such cases, I retained the original word in Malayalam, and transcribed it in English. For instance, the word 'witches' in the title is not used in the book. I retained the word *yakshi* and chose not to use 'witches' in the text. Yakshi, for a person from Kerala, is a woman who is bewitchingly beautiful and alluring, who taps into man's eternal fascination or fixation on the perfect female form, and then traps him to a shocking, reprehensible tryst with death. She lives on top of toddy palm trees and waits for her prey beneath the frangipani tree. The only clue that gives her away is that, when she walks, her feet will not touch the ground! How can the English word – 'witch' – overlaid with very different mythical and cultural associations signify this South Indian variant? Here, in the south of India, there are instances where the sacred and the profane commingle in the loom of myth; where binaries like *eros* and *thanatos* vanish. The yakshi is a devourer, but she is also a temptress who spares the innocent, and a goddess who is worshipped in many a wayside shrine. When I had to translate the word *Pootham*, I retained that word along with its meaning in English (demon). I did that in some cases where the English word did not substantially alter the meaning of the original.

Translator's Note

The text also has a liberal sprinkling of words in Tamizh and in the regional dialect of Nagercoil. I cross-checked the meaning of unfamiliar words, sometimes with the author himself, but more often with the poet-critic, Atmaraman (Bhaskaramenon Krishnakumar). I will count this endeavour as worthwhile if I have been able to share a fraction of the exhilaration and aesthetic satisfaction I felt while reading Jeyamohan's memoir.