THE END OF THE DAY

ONV KURUP
O.N.V. Kurup

Ottaplakkal Nambiyadikkal Velu Kurup, popularly known as O.N.V. Kurup is one of the greatest poets Kerala has seen. He was born on May 27, 1931 as the son of O.N. Krishna Kurup and K. Lakshmikutty Amma at Chavara, Kollam. O.N.V. published his first poem ‘Munnottu’ in 1946. His first poetry collection was ‘Porutunna Soundaryam’ in 1949. After his college education he joined the Maharaja’s College, Kochi as Lecturer in 1957. He served as Lecturer in University College, Trivandrum, Arts and Science College, Kozhikode, Government Brennen College, Thalasseri and was Head of the Department of the Government Women’s College, Trivandrum. He was the visiting Professor of Calicut University for one year and retired on May 21, 1986. He is the winner of the highest literary award in India, the Jnanpith of 2007. ONV is also gifted lyricist in Malayalam movies and has received National Award in 1989 and State Award 13 times for his literary work. In 2011 he was honoured with Padma Vibhushan, second highest civilian honour of the country on the eve of 64th republic day.
A.J. Thomas writes poetry and fiction in English and translates poetry, fiction & drama from Malayalam into English; has several books to his credit; did PhD in English & Translation Studies. Publishes poetry, translations, articles and book reviews in prestigious national journals like Indian Literature, The Little Magazine, The Literary Review(USA), A Hudson View(South Africa) etc. Recipient of Katha Award, AKMG Prize(USA), and Hutch Crossword Award(2007). Voluntarily retired as editor of Indian Literature, the bimonthly English journal of Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters, India) in August 2010, to continue teaching English in Garyounis University, Benghazi, Libya in its Ajdabiya Branch; however, after having been evacuated recently following the Libyan revolution, he has resumed editing Indian Literature, as Guest Editor.
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Translation
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INTRODUCTION

O.N.V. Kurup has been on the Malayalam poetic scene for more than six decades now. He belongs to that unique tribe of poets in the language who have successfully pursued social concerns without losing sight of the aesthetic element and combined music with sense in his poetry that tries to balance romantic charm with classical discipline. Born in Kerala during the turbulent years of social reform movements across communities, O.N.V., as he is known in Kerala, imbibed reformist, anti-colonial values very early in life, moulded later into modern socialist consciousness by his association with the Left political movements. He had inherited from his father the egalitarian ideals of Sree Narayana Guru, the philosopher-poet-reformer of Kerala as also his love of Sanskrit classics, mainly the works of Valmiki and Kalidasa. By his own confession, he was awakened into poetry by the music of the sea and the murmur of the coconut trees that gave its rhythm to life in his sea-side village.

O.N.V. had begun his poetic career as a committed progressive poet in the fifties, often called the ‘pink decade’ in Kerala’s history. But as a poet he went far ahead of his other progressive contemporaries like Vayalar Ramavarma and P. Bhaskaran as he created a de-sanskritised idiom close to the folk poetry, but inspired also by the great classics of the past as well as our time: he has
confessed the impact that poets like Lorca and Neruda had on his imagination. Travels also gave him a sense of the oneness of human life everywhere. In the 1960s, the poet passed through a phase of disillusionment as the Indian Communist Party got divided and the hopes of a radical social transformation seemed shattered—a phase represented by a poem like ‘Valappottukal’ (The Bangle Shards). But he soon overcame the despair by enlarging his sympathies beyond class, to embrace women, children and even the environment reflected in his poems like ‘Sooryageetam’ (An Ode to the Sun), ‘Bhoomikku Oru Charamageetam’ (An Elegy for Planet Earth) and ‘Pengal’ (Sister).

O.N.V. has a penchant for turning collective suffering into personal grief. His poetry is sensuous and melodious without compromising on the message he wants to convey. He has many poems on music like ‘Paul Robsonodu’ (To Paul Robson), ‘Orfiyoossinu Oru Geetam’ (A Song for Orpheus) Tansen, Mushaira, ‘Bavul Gayakar’ (The Bauls), ‘Aaraam Symfany’ (The Sixth Symphony) etc. He has identified the qualities of great poetry as ‘swayambhu’ (spontaneous), ‘kalyani’ (oriented towards the common good), ‘loukiki’ (this-worldly) and ‘sruti-laya samanvitam’ (melodious and harmonious). He has compared the poet to a mother-of-pearl turning an irritating grain of sand in its flesh into a glorious pearl through continuous labour and meditation and destroying itself when the pearl is perfect. Elsewhere he speaks of poetry as the narrow thread-like bridge to truth and as the sunbeam that illumined his solitary childhood.

O.N.V.’s poetry constantly invokes Kerala’s landscapes and cultural-historical memories. His poetry has been evolving over the years from a class-confined world view to a more universal
humanism, from lyrics to longer, at times narrative, poems, from
the surface of experience to a deeper psychological probing of
experience and from romantic sensuousness to a more classical
understanding of the art of poetry. His poetry successfully integrates
binaries like the individual and society, nature and man, family
and the world and instinct and civilization. For the poet man is the
measure of all things, though he is also conscious of what man has
done to man and to nature. His poetry celebrates freedom in its
many forms and dreams of a new world order free of exploitation
and injustice. Love is at the very core of his vision.

The End of the Day (‘Dinaantam’ in Malayalam) is one of
O.N.V.’s more recent longer poems. The poem is an epitome of the
poet’s life and vision. It is at the same time a scream for the dying
earth, an indulgence in nostalgia and a loud and clear expression
of the poet’s empathy with the suffering and the downtrodden
including the poor, the workers and women. Though clouded by
painful memories, at the end of the poem is a silver line of hope
that transcends all failures. The whole work is punctuated by
references to myths, legends and epics from the East as well as the
West.

The opening section creates the right mood for the ruminations
that follow. It is dusk; the poet is close to the end of his sojourn on
earth sitting lonely watching the retreating sun:

One day at last I am sitting on the pyol
of this house that’s falling apart
nursing the wounds my soul sustained
from lost battles all throughout.
He compares his solitude to many things in nature like the last flame left in a stone-lamp gone out, the single drop of water the retreating wave has left in a sea-shell, the lone bell fallen from an anklet following the quickening rhythm of the dance: similes the poet has ever been fond of.

In the second section the poet recollects the lost joys and visions of childhood when the flowers had been God’s eyes, the crows, the souls of the dead and the night, an elephant with the moon’s crown. That magic world now seems far away, lost forever:

Where are those day’s ends
when I sat all alone without any
intimate friends, sharing with the flowers
that bloomed in the yard, silently,
the little sorrows of my soul?

In the third and fourth sections the child confronts the merciless law of survival where the big one feeds on the smaller one. He feels one with the prey and is upset by the cruelty of nature:

Like an ancient traveller
who picks up from his pocket and fondles
the fragrant pebbles collected from
the shores of some sacred river
I pick up the grief remembering those who have
always been the victims in the hunt,
and caress them.

His father told him that one life becomes food for another, a principle he took time to understand. By the time he grasped its sense. Father was dead and gone like a pining glance from a
departing train. When Father turned into ashes the child felt like an orphan.

The following sections speak of his gloomy school days enlivened only by the mother’s love and the teacher’s kindness and the reading of the Ramayana that filled his mind with compassion for Sita’s plight. His village too taught him lessons in the beauty and grace of nature as well as sympathy for the toilers who lived in eternal poverty despite their hard work.

The water in the well dried up, like the decline of Grace.

One day a close friend of the poet left to join the army to fight for the Whites and soon his baggage returned from the front as he was killed in combat turning the poet’s nightmares about him into reality. The poet wonders how many such lost lives made one victory in battle! The experience taught him to hate war in all its forms and look at it as a deep human tragedy and a banquet of death, and not a manifestation of chivalry and heroism. He identifies himself with Odysseus who had come back to Ithaca after the Trojan battle, confronting his own death in the form of those trying to woo his wife, thinking she is now an eligible widow. The poet also recollects the battle at Kurukshetra in the epic Mahabharata and the weeping and wailing of Gandhari for her lost children. Coming closer to the present he recalls a little child’s head being cut off in a battle scene as also that painful image of the little girl fleeing the napalm bomb in the Vietnam War. He can only think of Sage Valmiki who had realised the futility of it all. He also recalls Alexander’s last request to his followers to keep his palms opened skyward in a gesture of renunciation of all that he had acquired through conquest and Ashoka’s expression of remorse and his turning to Buddha for