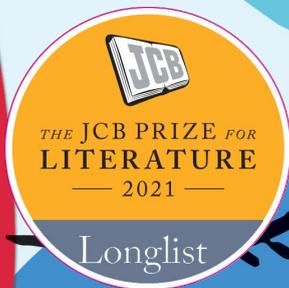


Winner of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award

THACHOM POYIL RAJEEVAN



The  
Man Who  
Learnt to Fly  
but  
Could Not Land

Translated by P.J. Mathew



# The Man Who Learnt to Fly but Could Not Land

by Thachom Poyil Rajeevan

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*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
LITERATURE  
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the  
JCB Prize for Literature

BOOK I  
BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

I

The year was either 1919 or 1920. It could even have been 1921. The exact year is unclear. It was a time of monsoon downpours. Whether the month was Karkkitakam or Midhunam was also uncertain. Floodwaters had swamped the Koolivayal rice fields. Suddenly, piercing the midnight silence of the rain-soaked and shivering Kottoor, a shrill hoot rent the air. The Chengottu Hills and the Oolery Hills passed it on to Pallikkunnu and the Thandapram Hills. Only Veyappara pretended not to have heard it.

The hooting emanated from the bathing pond in front of the Koyilothu Thazhe house, close to the Mepadi rice fields. It rose from Changaran's throat. Not once, but several times. There was no one in Kottoor who could hoot like Changaran. It was then customary to get a Thiyya to hoot to announce the birth of a boy in a Nair household. Therefore, when a Nair lady developed labour pains, they sent not only for the midwife but also for the ace hooter Changaran. And Changaran had been at Koyilothu Thazhe since early morning that day, staying in the hayloft attached to the cowshed, downing arrack and chewing betel nut.

It was Devayani Amma, wife of Koyilothu Thazhe Kunjappa Nair, who had developed labour pains. Devayani Amma was a gentle

lady. The people of Kottoor saw her only once a year when she came out for the festival in the Cherumanthottu temple. The Bhagavati of Cherumanthottu was the presiding deity of Koyilothu Thazhe, a branch of the Cherumanthottu house. It was to the Koyilothu Thazhe house that the Bhagavati would go first on festival day, possessed and dancing, accompanied by *chenda* drummers and torchbearers in front and behind. Devayani Amma would be waiting in the front yard for the grand ingress of the Bhagavati. She wouldn't hear the *chenda*, but hear the tinkle of the trinkets on the goddess's drawn sword and the jingle of the anklets.

Devayani Amma was very particular about the preparations for the reception. She would sweep the front yard herself and daub cowdung paste to purify the place, resolutely declining help from the army of domestic help that she had. It was her way of paying respect to the Bhagavati. Once the ritual cleaning was over, she would bathe, wear a white mundu, adorn her forehead with a *kuri*, and light the ceremonial wick lamp. Looking more radiant than the lit lamp, she was now all ready to welcome the Bhagavati.

Everyone in the family would come for the festival. It was mandatory that everyone be present in the front yard when the Bhagavati made her entry. But the Bhagavati would pretend not to notice anyone. She would first circumambulate the tulsi bush in the middle of the front yard several times, run north to south three or four times and then go straight to where Devayani Amma was waiting. The Bhagavati would then stomp about a few times, panting, and talk haltingly in a strange and incoherent tongue.

Devayani Amma's face would be aglow with fear, reverence, gentleness and prayer. The goddess would then put her hand on the head of everyone in the house, uttering something incoherently, and go back after running the length of the front yard once or twice just as she did upon entry. Then Devayani Amma would step into the house, leaving the lamp to run its course. Her next appearance outside the door would be at the next festival a year away.

The Koyilothu Thazhe family enjoyed great prestige and wealth. It was to this family that the Valoor palace had assigned the right to administer the village and collect the levies even though there were several other Nair families in the village with equal rank. And the Koyilothu Thazhe family discharged their duties honourably.

Even if the tenants failed to pay their dues, the family would remit the royal dues from their own income. And the tenants would not exploit this kindness, and tried to pay up promptly. It is said the name of the family, Koyilothu Thazhe, meaning 'the palace down there', was personally given by the suzerain as a special favour.

Indeed, the only family from Kottoor invited to witness Kathakali performances in the royal court was Koyilothu Thazhe. The lord is known to have snubbed those who questioned the special favour with the remark: 'Can you tell the difference between Kathakali and Thira? The Koyilothu Thazhe people know.'

However, the Koyilothu Thazhe house had a curse on it – tough luck begetting male progeny. Kunjappa Nair's father, Chappan Nair, had eight children. Only one of them was male – Kunjappa Nair. All the rest were girls and their children too were girls. Not because they did not give birth to boys. They did, but all of them died at birth or soon afterwards. As for Kunjappa Nair, he didn't have a child for several years after marriage.

A popular joke in Kottoor, of course behind the back of Kunjappa Nair, was that he and Devayani Amma slept in separate rooms and that he dared not touch her for fear of hurting her.

There were several others who believed that Kunjappa Nair was biding time for propitious star configurations for the birth of a male child. For Kunjappa Nair knew some astrology too. But the people at large took Devayani Amma to be barren and Kunjappa Nair to be star-crossed.

But, belying all calculations, Devayani Amma conceived. And for Kunjappa Nair, ever since he learnt about the conception, it was as

if he had taken the celibacy vow for the Sabarimala pilgrimage. His pious nature turned even more pious – prayers and temple visits all the time, and reading the sacred books when he was home. He was afraid to even look at his wife lest his unguarded stare endanger the foetus.

He instructed his labourers not to overburden the bulls or belabour them. The cows should be milked only after the calves have had their fill. Fortunately, he didn't have to instruct the domestic hands not to clean fish or slaughter fowls or goats because the household was vegetarian.

Devayani Amma's routines too underwent substantial changes. Her monthly ritual bath, smearing turmeric paste, became a daily affair. She would sit for hours every evening rubbing liniments all over the body and foment the body with a towel dipped in hot water. She would purge her stomach periodically by consuming virgin coconut oil laced with palm gur.

She made it a point to join the women in the work-shed, grab a pestle and husk some rice. It was something she had never done before. Similarly, she came out into the sun and spread parboiled paddy for drying and turned it over periodically with her feet or leant down to use her hands. She swept the courtyard with a broom, avoided catnaps, read 'Sheelavati' and 'Krishnappattu', and tried to dream of Sree Krishna and Sree Rama for the sake of the life growing in her womb.

Devayani Amma's naturally fair complexion and slim frame took on an extra gleam after the conception, so much so that one could almost see through her translucent body. The hair on her belly took on a golden hue which she caressed with a secret smile.

Her labour pain started early in the morning. The room on the west side had been readied for the impending birth. It had a single-frame window which opened into Kunjappa Nair's private study. Ever since he learnt that Devayani Amma had conceived, Kunjappa Nair remained confined to this room. From there, he could monitor whatever happened in his wife's room. It was through that window,

in the sixth or seventh month of pregnancy, that he learnt about Devayani Amma's difficulty to turn in bed and her growing sense of unease. He would get up with a start in the middle of the night and go to the window to listen in for her breathing, which he could hear, however subdued it was, and he could well imagine how her belly rose and fell while breathing.

By midday, Devayani Amma's father, Nellikandy Shekharan Nair, and mother, Bhargavi Amma, and sister, Leela, arrived. Shekharan Nair sat down in the portico alongside Kunjappa Nair, while Bhargavi Amma and Leela went straight into the labour room.

The delivery did not take place even by evening. What came out of the room were only the agonized cries of Devayani Amma.

'If it were to be such a torture, it would have been better had it not happened at all,' whispered Kunjappa Nair, his face dropping.

'Don't worry, everything will be taken care of by the Paradevata,' said Shekharan Nair, seeking to comfort his son-in-law.

Dusk had come and gone, and nothing happened. Shekharan Nair went up to the door of the labour room and called out to his wife for news.

'The head is visible,' said Bhargavi Amma.

'Should we look for another midwife?' he asked.

'It wouldn't make any difference,' she said. After a pause, she suggested, 'Taking her to Kozhikode might help, but is it possible?'

Shekharan Nair returned to his seat next to Kunjappa Nair and sat down.

'If only one can be saved, save the mother,' Shekharan Nair prayed under his breath, but it came out rather loud.

Kunjappa Nair, who was praying silently, stared at his father-in-law in anger and helplessness. This face of his son-in-law was new to Shekharan Nair and he froze in his seat.

'The head is half out and stuck. No amount of massaging is helping,' Bhargavi Amma came out and said.

'Ask the midwife to leave if she can't.' Shekharan Nair's anxiety turned into anger.

'What will we do then?' Bhargavi Amma's frustration turned into tears. She was exhausted.

The maids and women from the neighbourhood hung around the hallway and the outhouse staring at each other, while their men stood around the veranda and the courtyard.

It was only then that Kunjappa Nair had noticed the people standing in the rain. 'Why do you stand in the rain? Get into the veranda.'

Quite a few of them had never set foot on the veranda of the Koyilothu Thazhe house; they would come up to the courtyard, complete the business they came for and go back. But pain and sadness had shrunk distances. All of them went into the veranda.

Towards midnight, Devayani Amma became delirious. She started talking senselessly. No, not really nonsense; it was an outpouring of her subconscious mind. Pain had apparently breached the floodgates of her inner self. Words came rushing out like rubble and slush.

'Pull that son of the halfwit out, you bitch!' Devayani Amma screamed at the midwife.

Kunki, the midwife, smirked, as if conveying she had heard such things a lot. 'Please keep quiet, Thambratty, people will hear,' she said in a hushed tone.

'Let them hear, so what? Look at that bum, sitting mum after landing me in this! Call that son of a bitch! It's not enough to come sniffing at night. Didn't he cause all this? Coming to me with a hard-on after looking at dates and stars! I can't handle this by myself. Ask him to drag this seed of his out of me... This son of a bum...'

Devayani Amma's words took on sharp edges. She leapt around in her bed. She was no longer the innocent and pure Devayani Amma, the one like a tulsi bud. This was another Devayani Amma altogether. Her language now could put streetwalkers to shame. All this wounded Kunjappa Nair.

'Keep quiet, child. Close your mouth and strain well,' Bhargavi Amma said.

'If this eases her pain, there's no harm, Thambratty; let her go on,' said Kunki.

Outside, it was pouring, as though setting a background score for the pain, cries and anxiety. Water came down in sheets on to the roof of the house and the foliage outside. Since the rain had shut out the ears of all, much of what Devayani Amma had said was not heard by most. Kunjappa Nair and Shekharan Nair derived some comfort from it.

When it appeared that there would be no let-up in the pain and the rain, Kunjappa Nair directed those standing on the veranda: 'Tie two poles to that string cot. I've heard there is a new hospital that's been opened at Theruvathakkadave. We will take her there.'

'In this rain?' someone asked.

'Can we do anything about it?' Kunjappa Nair retorted.

The string cot that Kunjappa Nair used for his afternoon siesta in the portico was then tied securely to two bamboo poles.

'Now, bring her out,' Kunjappa Nair said.

Shekharan Nair sat helplessly in the portico. There was neither anger nor sadness on his face. His face appeared to say without saying that he had nothing to say or do in the matter; everything was in the hands of the Paradevata.

But before the people entered the labour room, the cry of a baby rent the air. Opening the door of the room, Kunki came out with a kerosene wicker lamp that was billowing heavy black smoke. The smell of smoke blended with the dampness outside.

'It's done. It's a boy!' announced Kunki.

No sooner had Kunki spoken than Changaran let out his trademark hoot: 'Coo... Coo.' Not once, but several times, lest anyone in Kottoor miss the news.

What Changaran had announced to the world that rainy midnight was the birth of Koyilothu Thazhe Narayanan, aka K.T.N. Kottoor, who earned a name for the secluded village of Kottoor with his life and writing. Of course, Changaran had no clue about what was to come.

## 2

All through, Narayanan's life presented a string of surprises, right from birth. He was born when it was almost certain he would not. He didn't cry for days after the first cry at birth.

'Could he be dumb, god?' Kunjappa Nair and Devayani Amma looked at each other, anguish writ all over their faces.

What Devayani Amma had blurted out during her labour had created some distance between them. Devayani Amma looked at Kunjappa Nair as though she had been caught red-handed. And Kunjappa Nair, on his part, felt guilty that he had made her go through all the trouble. However, there was no let-up in the feelings of mutual love and regard.

It was an ordinary day when Devayani Amma went into the bath after securing the baby with pillows on both sides. Then she started hearing a continuous cry from the room. Devayani Amma didn't first pay attention, assuming it to be from one of the babies of the servants.

'Kamala, Kuttymalu... see whose baby is crying,' she called out to the maids from the bath. 'Go and see if someone has fallen down or become sick. Take care of it first; your washing or pounding can wait,' said Devayani Amma, as she poured warm water on her body that had been smeared with medicated liniments.

'It's Thambtratty's baby,' responded Kamala and Kuttymalu from the courtyard.

Devayani Amma ran into the baby's room with only a mundu on. It was wet and clung to her fair body. Her tiny buttocks and breasts

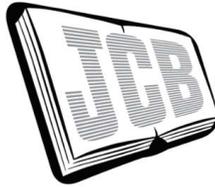
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