

# THE BOOK OF PASSING SHADOWS

C.V. Balakrishnan

Translated from the Malayalam original  
*Ayussinte Pusthakam* by

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I recall a night of December 1979, when I was in Calcutta on a Kerala Sahitya Akademi fellowship for the study of Bengali theatre. After watching a play by Badal Sircar in the Theosophical Society hall in College Street, I was waiting at Chowringhee for the bus to Ballygunj. Suddenly, the surrounding foggy night reverberated with the sound of music and dancing. A group of youth was seen approaching from Bentinck Street toward Chowringhee singing and dancing to the accompaniment of strings and percussion. They were singing Christmas carols. It was Christmas eve.

Memories of several forgotten Christmas festivals came flooding back. Those festivities belonged to me as well. I instinctively merged into the band of carolling youth who reminded me of those forgotten Christmases. I felt like drifting with them along the Chowringhee lane, sharing their joy and enthusiasm. It was an unforgettable experience.

A few days later, I happened to visit the famous St. Paul's Cathedral. It was daytime. The courtyard was deserted. And so was the cathedral. There was absolute silence. I took a seat in a pew facing the altar. I picked up a Bible from the desk in front, opened it, and began to read. I don't remember what I read. The only thing I remember is that I read only a little.

Then I became lost in countless memories that transported me back to another world and time. A cluster of villages lay beneath a veil of mist. Crops of ginger, turmeric, tapioca, and rubber trees covered the slopes. Four-legged watch-sheds erected by farmers dotted the countryside. Tangled webs of footpaths and rivers flowing through the woods went zigzag across the landscape. Green hills playing hide-and-seek with the rain and fog kept reappearing in the sun. The slopes were teeming with rabbits crouching in the thickets and grazing domestic swine. Wild boars were dying from biting country explosives. Church bells were chiming and pretty girls wearing scarves on their heads were hurrying to church.

Memories came crowding. The Vicar and I were playing a game of chess, our eyes glued to the chessboard. The sound of guitar and violins being practised in the adjacent room overflowed into our ears. In those days, I lived like a Christian, wearing the Catholic amulet called 'venthinga' around my neck and regularly reading the Bible. I remembered all these things sitting alone in the St. Paul's Cathedral. The idea of the novel *Ayussinte Pusthakam* germinated from these memories.

This novel began to be serialized in the weekly, *Mathrubhoomi*, from April 1983. The well known artist A.S. Nair, who drew the illustrations, once admitted to me that he was unable to represent adequately the intensity of the novel's sexuality. A girl once proudly announced that this novel was the first gift she had received from her boyfriend. A cancer patient languishing in Regional Cancer Centre,

Thiruvananthapuram, had read this book several times, before he yielded to the disease. A fellow passenger I met on a train journey confessed that this novel had helped him overcome a great crisis in his life.

Twelve years ago, *Ayussinte Pusthakam* was translated into Tamil as *Uyir Puththagam*. I am happy that a renowned publishing house like Niyogi Books is publishing an English translation of my book. I am grateful to Mini Krishnan for the steady support she has extended to make this novel accessible to a potential audience of readers of the English language.

C.V. Balakrishnan



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The motivation behind undertaking the translation of *Ayussinte Pusthakam* into English was circumstantial rather than personal. Sometime in 2011, when the author, C.V. Balakrishnan, visited Kottayam in connection with 30 years of its publication, friends proposed that I must translate the book into English. The author accepted the proposal and I agreed to do it, without hesitation, despite the mammoth nature of the task and the challenges of translating one of the best written novels in Malayalam. The popularity of the novel still holds even after 36 years of its publication.

Besides the initial encouragement that came from friends, my own admiration for the author and the work has equally influenced my readiness to translate *Ayussinte Pusthakam*. The ethics of translation wants us to serve the text. And the text is best served by being faithful to it. In my translation, I have tried my best to follow this principle of fidelity to the text.

*Ayussinte Pusthakam* deals with the trials and tribulations of a group of Catholic Christians who migrated from central Kerala and settled in north Malabar and who constituted themselves into a well-knit community of an 'edavaka' or pastorate. As such, the history of migration and settlement forms part of the substructure of the text. However, the

language of the novel bears no resemblance either to the language the migrants had left behind or to the language of north Malabar where they had settled down. Though region-blind, this invented language turns out to be highly allusive and fascinating. Allusions to characters, events, and passages in the Bible, together with a well-organized plot and lucid style of writing, holds the key to the poetic function and aesthetic experience of this novel. The harmonious blend of language and theme, feeling and thought adds to the magic of the text.

The greatest challenge a translator faces is the fear of losing the original beauty of the book ‘in translation’. As I set out to work on this translation, difficulties began to appear one by one. The style of language adopted by *Ayussinte Pusthakam* was modelled on the Malayalam translation of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. How to overcome the problem of translating the antique beauty of this biblical language back into English for contemporary readers? Thus, relying mainly on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) rather than the KJV, I have retained some of the characteristic biblical idioms and phrases with slight changes, for instance, ‘why is your face fallen’ instead of ‘why has thy countenance fallen’. Another example is the use of the introducing phrase of biblical narration, ‘And it came to pass’. The biblical use of the word ‘know’ (Gen 4:1) in the sense of ‘to have sex’ or ‘to consummate marriage’ is used in the novel several times. The proverbial saying, ‘There is no witchcraft against Jacob’ (Num 23:23), and the poetic phrase ‘gathered to his

people' (Gen 25:8) used to denote the death of a person are also suggestive of the Bible.

The tension between sexuality and spirituality and the sombre ruminations on the passing nature of human life that are corollary to the central theme of sin and retribution are suggested through allusions to passages from various books of the Bible. 'Sin lies at your door' (Gen 4:7), 'Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death' (Ex 21:15), and 'As for mortals, their days are like grass' (Ps 103:15) are a few examples. The archetypal or mythical scaffold lending universal significance to the novel is built on allusions lavishly drawn from the biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Job, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Amos, and Epistles of St. Paul.

An important historical coordinate relevant to an understanding of the novel is the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. The question of celibacy of priests is discussed in the novel in the wake of the deliberations in this historic council.

The narrative from the beginning sets in motion a train of deaths—of Theresa, Paolo, Kochurosa, Samuel, Skaria, Yakob, and Sara. This overwhelming predominance of deaths made me translate the Malayalam title *Ayussinte Pusthakam* or the Book of Life as *The Book of Passing Shadows*.

I would like to thank Mini Krishnan for her consistent support, Latha Anantharaman, and Arunima Ghosh for their editorial attention, and Niyogi Books for publishing this book. I would also like to express my dearest wish to see *The Book of Passing Shadows / Ayussinte Pusthakam* gaining for its author a new and potential English-reading audience.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

**Yohannan:** the protagonist, a teenage boy

Family members: Thoma (father), Theresa (mother; passed away when Yohannan was yet a child), Annie (elder sister), Paolo (grandfather), Elisha (grandmother)

**Joshi:** Yohannan's classmate and closest friend

Family members: Daniel (father), Esther (mother), Susan and Valsamma (sisters)

**Rahel, Silvy, Michael, Clara, Jessy, Ninachen:**

Yohannan's schoolmates

**Yakob, Philipos, Peter:** Thoma's friends

**Isaac:** bar owner

**Lohitakshan:** barber

**Vicar, Assistant Vicar, Ephraim, Mathew, Sister Marianos and Sister Mithiria:** Members of the church in the parish

**Samuel:** Annie's teacher at school

Family members: Rosamma (wife) and Kochurosa (daughter)

**Sara:** the wife of a character called Skaria, who remains very ill throughout the novel, eventually dies, and leaves his young widow all alone, who easily becomes the object of desire for some men in the parish, and Yohannan's love interest

# THE BOOK OF PASSING SHADOWS

W eeping and wailing, puffing and panting, Rahel ran. Climbing the terraces bathed in the evening shades, she reached the boundary, when she came upon Annie and Yohannan walking straight toward her. Rahel hastily wiped the tears from her eyes and pushed on as if nothing had happened. But her heart was still crying.

Annie approached her and asked, 'Rahel, Rahel, why were you crying? Why has your face fallen?'

Fearful and trembling, Rahel ran away tearfully, letting out a pent-up cry.

Annie and Yohannan halted in fear. Soon, they followed suit, and rushed down the terraces, past the rubber trees.



Paolo tottered against the pigsty, reeling under Thoma's heavy blow. Darkness prevailed on his senses. Dragging him down on the ground, Thoma climbed onto his chest. Paolo let out a terrified scream. Thoma caught him by the throat and, tightening his grip, choked him. Writhing in pain, Paolo dug his sharp nails into Thoma's flesh. His legs beat frantically against the ground.

It was into this woeful mess that Annie and Yohannan came rushing.

Frightened, Annie called out unto the Lord for help, her palms close to her chest. Yohannan did not know what to do. He stood there for a while, deathly pale and drawn. Then he tried to pull his father away.

With a growl, Thoma pushed him and Yohannan fell on his back. Annie ran to the wagon road to see if any help was at hand.

Yohannan was badly hurt. Propping himself up on his arms and rising to his feet, he saw his grandfather naked. Yohannan quickly turned his face away.

Hearing Annie's cry for help, Yakob and Philipos ran in from the road. Together they struggled to pull Thoma away from Paolo and made him to stand aside.

'Isn't it your own father that you are battering like this?' demanded Yakob.

'An old man, too,' added Philipos.

'Even so, what should I do if he does a loathsome thing?' Thoma hissed, struggling to wriggle out of their grip.

Yakob looked at Paolo and took pity on him. He lay spreadeagled on the ground, eyes shut and groaning. Yakob bent down and covered his nakedness, putting right his dishevelled clothes.

'Why don't you ask him?' bellowed Thoma, scornfully.

'Better ask him,' said Thoma, with deep scorn.

Annie leaned on Yohannan, unable to hold back her bawl. Yohannan's slender body was overcome by shivering.

‘Can’t you get up?’ Yakob asked Paolo, sympathetically.

Paolo was wroth and growled bitterly as he hurled blatant terms of abuse at Thoma. Once again, Thoma became a madman. Lifting his leg, he kicked Paolo and Paolo moaned. The pigs in the sty grunted too.

As Thoma prepared to kick Paolo again, Yakob and Philipos mustered all their strength and pulled him away to a safe distance.

‘If only I had a dagger with me... Dammit!’ Thoma cursed.

‘Then you would have landed in jail for killing an old man,’ said Philipos.

Smiling wryly, Thoma said, ‘Who is afraid of going to jail? I have already been there once.’



Not only Yakob and Philipos, but all the parishioners remembered the incident. In those days, Paolo, the pure-hearted, went about telling them with pathos how Thoma was the first to dishonour his ancestral line by going to prison. Some of the parishioners could still clearly recall the day when Thoma went to prison. Unable to endure the humiliation, Paolo went to the churchyard and wept bitterly beside his wife Elisha’s grave.

Although ripe with age, Paolo’s body was not that feeble. He was shorter than Thoma. His hair was not yet entirely grey. His face was a little swollen and looked heavy. Always there

was a placid and harmless air about his face. The drooping corners of his mouth may have given him this bovine look. Not in the habit of wearing a shirt, he was content with an upper cloth. His appearance and character had several of the saintly qualities, though people were hard put to define them precisely. From his early youth, he was deeply involved in church and parish activities. No one in the parish would be able to recall him missing a Holy Mass. As he advanced in years, he grew in spirit and godliness. He sanctified his old age with piety and devotion, reading regularly from the Old and New Testaments, and singing songs of praise in a crawling, subdued voice. When he chanted prayers in a trailing, mournful tone, Annie and Yohannan accompanied him, kneeling by his side, rapt in the fullness of their hearts and muttering 'Amen, Amen' at intervals.

Their pious ways were quite unfamiliar to Thoma for a fairly long time. This was not at all a secret exclusive to the family. Several God-fearing people in the parish had prophesied and warned that unless he repented and turned from sinful ways, he would perish as an unredeemable miscreant. And indeed, they all pitied his woman, Theresa.

Thoma was 30 when he took Theresa as his wife. She conceived and bore him a daughter, who was named Annie. Thoma knew his wife again. She conceived again and bore him a son. He was named Yohannan. And all the days of Theresa were forty-two years. It came to pass, when Theresa gave up her ghost, Thoma was in jail, serving a term of rigorous imprisonment for having stabbed a man. The

suggestion that he be informed and released on parole to attend the funeral went unheeded before Paolo's obstinacy. Thus, Theresa was buried and was gathered to her people without Thoma ever knowing it.

Thoma heard of her death much later, from a thief.

The Thoma who returned from prison was an entirely different person. Guilt and humiliation haunted him. He was averse to going home, afraid to face his children. The thought that Theresa died while he lay fallen in some deep ditch of sin consumed him with an inconsolable grief. He took to drinking in order to forget it. And he wept bitterly whenever he remembered Theresa. He wandered listlessly in the parish, lamenting, magnifying her excellence, and confessing his own worthlessness.

Paolo was aware of Thoma's whereabouts, that he was living like a vagabond and wandering like a fugitive, refusing to accept solace from anyone. But he affected ignorance and never betrayed himself. When someone told him that Thoma used to sleep in the cemetery at night, he answered with an indifferent grumble.

Then one day, an astonishing thing happened.

Paolo had just come back from church after the Sunday service. The fragrance of frankincense from the censer at the Holy Mass still lingered about him. Spiritual admonitions such as 'Let everything be done in brotherly love' and 'Salute one another with a holy kiss' still echoed in his mind. He lay on the veranda couch and dozed off, for how long he did not know. Feeling a wetness under his feet, he woke up. His feet