

Facing Death in Modern Tamil Literature¹

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Introduction

A Tamil critic has claimed that the shadow of death lies on all of Ramamirtham's works (Ramamirtham 1984: 192). Since this is only a slight exaggeration, I shall refer to him most frequently, but also nearly all other Tamil writers known to me deal with death in some of their tales. Probably because a Tamil rarely dies when alone, the writers more commonly describe the reaction of his family members or friends rather than his own feelings.

This reaction may be utter despair like that of the wife who has periodic attacks of hysteria and depression remembering her husband's death in an accident (Ramamirtham 1972: 17-18) or the father who remains listless and no longer wants to go to work after his little daughter's death (Sundaram 1974: 17-18), or the child who violently prevents adults from gathering the edible grains that grow on the sacred ground where his mother has been cremated (Jeyaprakasam, 1975: 12-14).

There can also be the opposite reaction. The death of a very old man who seems to have defied nature and whose long agony causes his relatives much trouble is greeted with relief, so that his funeral becomes a farce (Rajananarayanan 1975: 79-84). The writers also deal with people's reaction to a stranger's death. Perhaps the most extraordinary case is that of the young man travelling in a bus who sees the woman passenger sitting next to him suddenly drop on his lap and die. Naturally, he is shocked by this event, but its very strangeness also leads him to imagine that he might have been connected with her in a former birth (Ramamirtham 1964: 28-34).

Facing death normally implies coming to terms with the fear of death and the sorrow at leaving this world. In the following pages I shall examine how Tamil characters exhibit or do not exhibit these feelings.

I — Fear of Death?

But that the dread of something after death
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of...

[Hamlet, Act III, scene 1]

Hamlet's monologue containing these words is perhaps the most famous quotation of Shakespeare but those who rightly praise it may not always realize how strongly it is culturally determined. It presupposes a linear conception of time and no rebirth, two premises few westerners would doubt, and it

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presupposes a frightening afterlife in hell to which suicides are believed to be condemned. None of the characters facing death in the Tamil tales known to me adopts this reasoning. There is conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit belief in rebirth. The concepts of heaven and hell have also been known in Indian culture at least from the time of the *Mahābhārata*. Possibly introduced from the Near East, they are combined rather redundantly with belief in a return to earth, since the latter already foresees reward and punishment in higher or lower forms of life. According to some Hindus in real life and fiction the temporary waiting places of heaven and hell may be skipped altogether, for instance, when it is believed that grandparents are reborn in their grandchildren. They may also be interpreted metaphorically referring to happiness and suffering in this life, in particular in the expression “the suffering of hell” (*narakavēṭanai*).

However, since suicide is not considered sinful as in Christianity it would not cause rebirth in a lower form. Therefore, characters contemplating ending their own lives, would not be put off by the “dread of something after death”.

1. Suicide

In Tamil literature suicide is precisely the type of death in which no fear is ever mentioned. Despair and the loss of the will to live, the most common causes of suicide, completely override any possible fear. Like probably all literatures of the world, Tamil literature also deals with suicide out of unrequited or deluded love. Mauni (1991: 218–229) elaborates this somewhat trite theme in an original way. Learning that his beloved college mate has married somebody else, he sets himself a target. Leaving his house in the village he decides to walk as far as he can, taking every now and then a sip from a bottle until it is empty and he faints. The excess of alcohol has poisoned him. Those who find him are perplexed by the smell of alcohol from his mouth, since they know that he never drank.

Despair of a different kind leads to suicide in Jeyakanthan’s “I exist” (1974: 175–195). Sitting alone in a *maṅṭapam* a leper enjoys the food he received as alms, the cigarette he smokes, the clear sky, the fresh wind and the prospect of good sleep. He notices a youth who stretches himself out on the nearby railway line and drags him away. The youth, lame from birth, feels that he is of no use to anybody. He also knows that he is the cause of constant quarrels between his loving mother and his younger brother who resents the money she spends for any medicine that might cure his lameness. An incident in a bus had pushed him to his suicide attempt. The conductor had asked him rudely to get up from the ladies’ seat where his mother had made him sit next to her. He did get up only to fall immediately. The leper points out to the youth that in the bus, in which people had asked his forgiveness when they noticed his lameness, he would not even be allowed to enter. He also tells him that he must consider himself lucky since he is lovingly cared for by his mother. His consoling words give the lame boy a new will to live. Set at ease he falls asleep. On waking up he finds himself alone and then notices a crowd at the railway line where the leper

has committed suicide. In consoling the lame boy he had compared the latter's life cared for by a loving mother in a well-to-do house to his own much more miserable condition plagued by poverty and people's disgust at seeing him. He thus lost his will to live. The background of this poignant story is the Indian religious-philosophical concept of the chain of life and the narrow dividing line between life and death, of which I shall say more later.

Despair is not the only emotion that pushes people to commit suicide. Pride and the fear of losing one's honour may have the same effect. As a fire priest's daughter Raṅkā, in one of Kalpana's stories (1971: 30–51), has a very strong sense of pride and truth. When she realizes during her wedding night that her husband believes an anonymous letter casting doubt on her chastity and not her solemn words to the contrary she sets fire to herself. She does so not to prove her innocence in a fire ordeal but because she does not want to let herself be touched by a mean person. She is taken to the hospital. Whether she will survive is doubtful.

Janakiraman (1974: 46–60) elaborates a Buddhist tale in which the king's grandson, whose mother was not a pure *kṣatriya* feels ashamed when he notices that others in the banquet only pretend to eat and servants carefully wash the place where he sat. Waging war on his grandfather he wins. In punishment he asks his grandfather to have a meal with him. Under the pretext of washing away the blood and dust of the battle the grandfather drowns himself. He prefers to die rather than submit himself to the shame of sharing a meal with a socially inferior.

There are also stories about what might be called sacrificial suicide, above all that of the wife who immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Sometimes the woman who commits this type of suicide is not even the wife but only the betrothed of the deceased. In one of these tales by Akilan (1976: 67–80) the heroine's betrothed is shot during the turmoil at the first days of independence. When fire is set to her house where he had tried to protect her from a policeman's molestation, she does not flee but embracing her beloved lets herself be burnt to death together with his corpse.

Perhaps the most interesting tale of suicide is Pichamurty's "Investigation" (2000: 27–31), since it almost exactly reverses Hamlet's words. While Hamlet hesitates to commit suicide because of his religious-philosophical premise, Pichamurty's character commits suicide because of such a premise. The protagonist is a sceptic who thinks that gods are only stones and sacred tulsī beads nothing but dry parts of the plant. To test if the gods punish misdeeds he burns a temple car (*tēr*), but nothing happens. Then he hides at night in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the goddess, tears away her saree and attacks her with a chisel. Seeing his chisel slip he falls to the ground, has a vision of the goddess and swoons. When he regains consciousness it occurs to him that his vision must have been a dream caused by his fear, but this thought is immediately contrasted by another thought that he did see her. The doubts that torture him end when he comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to see the Lord (*ejamānaṅ*) while in the palace called life. Therefore, he will try to do so by

leaving it. Before drowning himself he writes a letter advising those who read it to stop arguing about religion and be content that the temple bell rings.

2. Accidental causes of death

In the preceding tales, fear of death could not arise because the mind of those who took the fatal step was wholly taken up by other thoughts and feelings. Instant death repeatedly dealt with by Ramamirtham is another way of preventing fear from arising. In a side-story of his “Evocative sound” (1987: 4–5) there is still a smile on the face of the man who died in a traffic accident. In fact, the shadow of death lying on many of his tales is no ugly shadow. This curious idea of a beautiful shadow of death also appears in a Tamil folk version of the Paraśurāma/Reṇuka myth in which the heroine loses her supernatural power to carry water in pots of unbaked clay when she is perturbed by the beautiful shadow of the god of death passing by (Murukanandam 1991: 107).

In real life and fiction snakebite may lead to nearly instantaneous death. Perhaps because the cobra is intimately connected with several deities of the Hindu pantheon and with *advaita* philosophy, rather than experiencing fear snakebite victims tend to direct their thoughts towards religious philosophy. The protagonist of Putumaippittan’s “The rope snake” (1973:20–27) continues his musing about the mind-createdness of things a few moments before his death. The protagonist of Ramamirtham’s “The anthill” had wantonly thrown stones at an anthill in his youth. At that time the cobra had looked out and hissed without biting him. When he is bitten in adulthood he wants to cut the wound or burn it but finds that he has neither a knife nor matches. With the poison rising in him he mentally converses with the cobra and comes to understand that he is really identical with the snake brahman (1952:64–97).

Ramamirtham also conceives of merciful accidental death in which, obviously, fear has no place. The protagonist of his “Somewhere in Kerala” (1988) has accidentally caused the death of a young woman who had embraced him while he was half asleep. He pushed her away and she hit her head on a mortar in falling. Frightened he rushes out of the hut and is bitten by a cobra. Feeling the pain he shouts “mother” — his deceased mother’s name is Nāgalakṣmī — and thinks he hears the silent echo “son”. He also understands that there is no more need to flee. The end of this novel combines a religious philosophical idea: the mother’s name suggests that she is an *avatāra* of a cobra, and the idea of a merciful death, since the victim of snakebite need not fear being convicted of murder or homicide.

Merciful accidental death of a different type ends the same author’s tale “Kastūrī” (1986: 18–37). When riding a bicycle with his little son, the latter tells his father that, the other day, before he returned from office, uncle Kastūrī had given him sweets and then locked him out of the house so that he could not go to his mother as he had wanted to do. Before fully realizing the implication of the boy’s words that his best friend and his wife had betrayed him a lightning stroke ends his life.

3. Physical causes of death

Disease and other physical causes of death may be accompanied by fear, but rather than “the dread of something after death” it is the fear of losing all that is dear to one in this world including one’s life. In order to calm this fear of coming to an end the religions of the world hold out two promises: either an afterlife in a different world such as a hades or a heaven or a return to this world in some other form. The Indian postulated desire for a liberation from rebirth runs counter to the normal desire not to come to an end. However, firstly even *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* is no complete end in a religious philosophy that knows no beginning and no end. Secondly, it seems to me that desire for liberation from rebirth is rather theoretical. In actual fact ordinary Hindus and Buddhists may desire to be reborn, albeit in a better form or again connected with a beloved person.

For thirty years the protagonist of Jeyakanthan’s “The death of a testament” (1973: 94–114) has suffered excruciating attacks of *angina pectoris*. Writing his testament he hides his fear. However, after all the persons he mentioned in his testament (his wife, his secret lover, his sons) and the very doctor who had predicted his imminent death have died, he realizes that it is useless to worry about death, it makes sense only to worry about how to live. Afraid that his testament might bring ill-luck he refrains from willing his house to the distant relatives who take care of him, and then burns it.

The only tale known to me that describes the dying person’s agony is Ramanathan’s “The dark canto” (1976: 132–146). The protagonist’s thoughts oscillate between the desire to go on living and the desire that his relatives, who anxiously wait for his demise, should end his suffering by killing him. They do not do so because it would be a sin, he concludes. This thought brings back to his mind the sin he committed thirty years ago. In an attack of fury he had killed his beloved eldest daughter, who was pregnant by a relative. The relative had wanted to marry the girl, but since he was only a coolie the marriage would have brought unbearable shame on her father. Now he deplores his rash act and also wonders whether she would not have shown some kindness to him like his other surviving daughter does. His remorse is likely greater than his physical pain and fear of death.

The last moments of other dying characters who have no crime in their past tend to be filled with pleasant thoughts. In Ramanathan’s story “Joy” (1976: 1–13) an old beggar is dying from hunger and cold. His rags are drenched by the rain and he is unable to beg for food. He has a dream or a fever delirium in which all people give him food. Rajanarayanan entitles one of his tales “Jaṭāyu” (1984: 121–133), the name of the vulture which trying to save Sītā from being abducted by Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* had its wings cut off and therefore precipitated to death. Rajanarayanan’s protagonist is a human noble character. With his bare hands he comes to the help of a woman importuned by two rowdies who cut off his two arms with a sickle. Before losing consciousness he sees in his mental eyes the smiling face of his daughter and his little grandson.

The husband in Ramamirtham's "Lines in the clouds" (1972: 116–126) has been bedridden for a year and a half. He finds peace in the thought that his wife cries for him and thinks how beautiful it would have been if he had died a month ago when she embraced him. In his dream of death he moves towards the pure golden rays of the rising sun.

In old age, the heroine of the same author's novel "The son" (1965) is bitten by a cobra. She applies some country medicine but then thinks that she has done all that was to do in her life and therefore reconciles herself to death. Perhaps because the cobra's poison is said to be blue, she has the impression that the blue sea rises in her. When she closes her eyes she is wholly pervaded by beautiful blueness.

As mentioned before, Ramamirtham is the author in whose works death plays the greatest role. It cannot be a foreboding since he is called the *Jāmbavān* among Tamil writers by reference to the long-lived bear in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The last-mentioned tale he wrote in the prime of life, and also later his fascination with the theme has not diminished. His tale "The journey" (1981: 124–138) also ends with the protagonist's death but his thoughts when approaching it are different from those mentioned earlier. His death might be counted among sacrificial deaths. When he touches his pulse as he is wont to do he notices that something is terribly wrong. He does not tell his son about to travel to an interview, fearing that if he delayed his departure by taking him to the hospital, he might ruin his career. He mentally blesses his son thinking that both of them will go on a journey. On his room darkness descends which is not the darkness of night. Noticing that his pulse has stopped he waits. In my view, these concluding words of the tale take out the sting of death. Convinced that death is no end the death candidate waits not with fear but with curiosity about what will come next.

II — Attitudes towards Life and Death

In most of the preceding tales no fear of death arises because the dying characters are absorbed in other thoughts, have no time to think or are consoled by the implicit belief that death is no end but will lead to a return.

Connected with this belief in rebirth is the concept of a chain of life. If rebirth may occur in any form, all living beings are connected chainlike and life and death may be held to be as close to each other as two beads on a necklace. Belief in this closeness of death to life renders death less gruesome. In Akilan's "In a place sheltered from the rain" (1976: 26–44) the rain penetrates through the leaking roof of the miserable hut where a feverish old woman and her granddaughter live. A friend offers to carry the old woman to a sheltered place. When his strength fails him he stops under a roof not knowing that it is the burning place. The girl knows it but cannot oblige him to move on. When the old woman dies, she cries and he tries to console her. His consoling embrace transforms itself into an erotic embrace so that new life is conceived on a bed of ashes.

The same conjunction of life and death occurs less dramatically in Ramamirtham's "Pūraṇī" (1963: 148). While the old woman Pūraṇī dies on the top floor of her house, on the ground floor her daughter-in-law gives birth to a granddaughter. This must be considered the old woman's rebirth according to what has been said before about the belief that the temporary waiting places of heaven and hell may, at times, be skipped.

The scientist in Jeyakanthan's "What is non-existent?" (1974: 162–174) also believes in a chain of life, but the chain he has in mind are future scientists who will conclude his work. Therefore, he calmly accepts dying.

The conviction that there is no creation *ex-novo*, that all creations are only transformations also leads to the conclusion that there is no complete end, no complete destruction. When an old woman in one of Putumaippittan's tales (1977: 196–203) points out to the god of Death how limited his power is, he renounces dragging her away with his rope, as he had intended to do. He thinks that in comparison to the defeat she has caused him the one he experienced when he could not drag away Mārkaṇḍeya clinging to the Śivaliṅgam was less shameful.

The *advaita* view of the ultimately illusionary nature of the world, i.e. its mind-createdness, can also provide consolation in those faced with death. Putumaippittan's character who had been thinking about time when he was bitten by a cobra continues these thoughts until the poison takes its effect. He concludes that since time depends on the mind, when his life is cut, time is also cut! it is only an illusionary rope-snake. Hindu religious philosophy has codified the connection between time and death in one of the names of the god of Death, Kālaṅ derived from "time" (*kālam*).

But even without philosophical consideration, it is possible to be indifferent to death. This is the state of mind of a seriously ill coolie woman in one of Alagiriswamy's tales (1977: 65–74). Having reconciled herself with the idea that she will soon die, she has devised a cruel game. Every now and then she pretends to be dead. Only after her two boys throw themselves over her imploring her not to die, she opens her eyes again laughing. When she really dies, her children cannot believe it and beat her corpse trying to make her open her eyes.

The protagonist of Ramamirtham's "Battle array" (1978: 63–86) exhibits a stoic attitude towards death of a more positive type. The tale is set during the Second World War when the inhabitants of Madras fled the city, fearing an imminent Japanese attack. He accompanies his friends to the railway station but then muses that better than fleeing death, which may also come in the village, or actively seeking it, is to live near it. At the thin line between life and death there is peace. After these reflections he proceeds straight to the recruiting office.

A further way of facing death is never to think about it. Horace's *carpe diem* wants us to remember that life is short, so we should enjoy it quickly. The old woman in Putumaippittan's story whom we met before, does not need this advice. In spite of her age it never occurs to her that the dark figure arriving at

her hut with a buffalo might be Yama, the god of Death. Because of her weak eyesight she mistakes him for her son with their own buffalo, and orders him how to feed the animal. Unable to convince her of her error, Yama has to show her his cosmic form. This also does not impress her and she starts arguing with him without the least fear or respect. Even after her victory over death, she does not worry that it might be only a temporary respite but immediately returns to practical matters of everyday life. She deplores that Yama, on leaving carried away with him the strong rope, which might have come handy to her.

III Facing the Sorrow of Departure

If “the dread of something after death”, does not trouble the characters in Tamil literature, they still have to come to terms with the sorrow of having to leave.

In addition to physical death, Indian culture also conceives of social death. The world renouncer dies to the world, i.e. he leaves his family and no longer actively engages in the affairs of the world. He does so voluntarily, but occasionally Hindu religion and society oblige a person to take this step. “All places are home to me” (*Yātum ūrē*), the first words of a famous poem of ancient Tamil literature expounding the sannyāsic ideal, is the title of a story by Janakiraman (1967: 21–35). It deals with the custom of taking the vow of renouncing the world in a crisis situation (*āpattu canyācam*). A world renouncer accepts a householder’s invitation to have a meal in his house and gives spiritual advice to him. The middle-aged householder remarks to his wife how good it would be if he also renounced the world, an idea not at all to her liking. Together with the *sannyāsin* the host attends a *Rāmāyaṇa* recital. The reciter recognizes the holy man. At the end of his recital he adds that evil relatives exist not only in the *Rāmāyaṇa* but also in real life. He tells that the *sannyāsin* used to be a well-to-do farmer without offspring. When he fell seriously ill his relatives put a begging bowl and a yogic staff into his hands enjoining on him to take a vow of *sannyāsa* so that he would reach liberation on his death and bring them honour. In reality they craved his wealth. The sick man miraculously survived. Since it is not proper for a *sannyāsin* to live in his home, he was obliged to become a wandering holy man. Reminded of his fate, the holy man weeps bitterly. Hearing this news the host’s wife laughs triumphantly convinced that the danger of her husband following the holy man’s example has passed.

Even though death is never mentioned before it happens its shadow is almost palpable in one of Ramamirtham’s stories entitled “Petals”, a metaphor for delicate children (1975: 92–106). A pregnant woman is about to leave for the hospital for delivery. The horse-drawn cart is waiting outside the house, but she always finds new ways to delay her departure as if she instinctively knew that she would not return. When news comes of her death, her husband who had never liked his weakly little son, now embraces him tightly. The story thus ends not in a chain of life but in a chain of love.

In a state of mental confusion, the same author’s heroine, Ekā, (1963:251) converses with brahman not realizing at first that she is about to die. But when

brahman tells her that she now belongs to him, she fights for a moment trying to cling to her sense of self while she feels being dragged away. What causes her sorrow is not her departure from the world but her loss of individuality, as implied in *advaita* philosophy.

In several authors' tales people fear an imaginary danger to their lives and die a psychogenic death. These include a criminal policeman ordered to watch over the corpse of a man who committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. The eerie surroundings and the memory of a woman who threw herself out of a train when he tried to rape her frighten him to such an extent that people find two corpses instead of one in the morning (Akilan 1977: 9–32).

The preceding characters were justly or unjustly afraid to die and sorry to leave a life which they loved. In order to overcome this sorrow Indian culture has preached unattachment for millennia. In the ancient Tamil poem mentioned before (*Puranānūru*: 1983, 192) the renouncer remains unperturbed in front of death and neither says that life is sweet nor that it is unpleasant. Of course, this drastic remedy is acceptable to only a minority of people. The majority has to find a milder or more gradual form of facing the sorrow of departure. The protagonist of Ramamirtham's story "The beam" is a "domestic *sannyāsin*", according to an ironic neologism for a retired man. Even though he does not leave for the forest or become a wandering holy man, as the sacred scriptures prescribe for the last two stages of life, he no longer occupies himself with worldly matters. When the ceiling fan drops from the worm-eaten beam, which his son has carelessly omitted to renew, and amputates his arm, he comments that "half the shirt has been doffed" (1989: 175–187).

Even without philosophical knowledge the same author's country woman Pūraṇi reaches a similar detachment a few moments before her death at a ripe old age. She notices that she does not need anybody, any more, not even her husband and not even herself (1963: 147–148).

With the exception of the husband in "Lines in the clouds", who has been bedridden for a year and a half, all other characters destined to die in the preceding tales are conscious of it only for a very short time. Even in the case of the bedridden man, the author mentions his several earlier operations but then concentrates only on his last moments. All tales discussed so far were short stories or dealt with death only at the end of a longer narrative. Karthigesu, however, dedicates a whole novel to the theme. He entitles it *Antima kālam* "The end" (1998). Since it refers to the end of life implicitly, the title might be translated by the equally implicit modern medical neologism "Terminal period" but this ugly euphemism is not of the author's intention as the designer of the cover has well understood. He illustrates the end of life through the setting sun illuminating a tree with falling leaves. Even though "the evening of one's life" may be a worn-out metaphor, Henle has rightly remarked that it takes away the crudeness of the term "death" and therefore has its justification (1983:99–100).

Karthigesu's novel starts with an image that reveals his religious-philosophical premise. The protagonist Sundaram has just received the result of his medical exams: he has a brain tumour and metastases in his whole body. Driving home he stops his car to wait for the end of a downpour. The rain

draws lines on the windshield and the wiper cancels them endlessly. The rain is unconcerned about this destruction and so is the wiper. What comes first and what follows, the drawing or the wiping off? Sundaram's story is entwined with the conjugal problems of his daughter who left her husband for another man because he mistreats her to the point of extinguishing his cigarette on her skin. She entrusts her little son to his grandparents. Brought up with English by his parents the boy knows no Tamil. Therefore his grandfather tries to teach him, pertinently starting with the first couplet of the *Tirukkural*, which asserts the preeminence of God. "Like the 'a' is the first letter of the alphabet, so God is the first (highest) of the world" (1969: 1.1.). Sundaram is no atheist but he also does not worship in any temple. No religious rite is mentioned in the whole novel which reserves much space for his reflections and uncertainties. Sentences ending with the Tamil particles 'ā' for a definite question and 'ō' for an uncertain one abound.

The radiotherapy he takes only has bad side-effects but brings no improvement. His condition worsens so that he needs a wheel-chair and is hospitalized. His little grandson, who has always been weak, and coughing, turns out to have acute leukemia and is admitted to the same hospital. Since Sundaram's radiotherapy proves ineffective, the Chinese doctor suggests that he should try a new hormone therapy a Malay doctor has brought from the US. Sundaram, accepts to try it but has no hope, not only because only 55% of patients are said to obtain an improvement but also because he has a bad memory of the doctor. Years ago when he was a college teacher he had prevented, him, then an unruly student, from raping a Malay co-student, thus shaming him. He thinks that the doctor will take the opportunity to revenge himself and kill him rather than cure him. However, the doctor no longer thinks of the unpleasant incident. With her smiling face and kind conversation the Christian nurse in the hospital is a great consolation for him. Adopting a karmic view, he thinks that his decease must be a punishment (*taṇṭaṇṇai*), but she denies it saying that it is God's test (*cōṭaṇṇai*). When she leaves for Rome, he asks her to pray for him that God on Michelangelo's fresco should touch man rather than leaving a small space between their fingers. While Western critics praise Michelangelo for his suggestive image of God's life-giving power, Karthigesu's reinterpretation seems to be inspired by the much greater closeness between man and God arriving at postulating the identity of the individual soul (*ātmā*) and the Absolute (*paramātmā*) according to *advaita* philosophy

In the course of his illness Sundaram's interest in religious matters deepens and he reads books on Buddha and Ramakrishna. He has become reconciled with the idea of dying and only hopes that he will do so before his grandson, but this hope does not come true. In order to look at the boy for the last time he gets up from his wheel chair without noticing that being able to do so shows an improvement of his condition. The course of his illness, which first worsened continuously nearly to death and then gradually improves makes me think of a person caught in a whirlpool. If he waits calmly when dragged down until he reaches the bottom of the river and then pushes himself off sideways, he is said to be able to rise again. Sundaram is discharged from the hospital not

because he is given up as a hopeless case, as he first thinks, but because he can now be treated ambulantly. The following disease-free years bring him both joy and sorrow. The common sorrow about their little son's death has brought about his daughter's reconciliation with her husband and she gives birth to a girl child. Sundaram's wife and his aunt, who has lived in their house for years, die. His elder sister now takes care of him. The pendulum of his life continues to swing up and down, but his joy when it rises and his sorrow when it descends are no longer as intense as before. His close encounter with death has taught him the mild form of detachment which the Hindu sacred books recommend for the third stage of life.

Ramamirtham tells of his own mild form of detachment. On recovery from a serious illness he has the impression that everything is far removed like looking through the telescope from the other side (1986: 196–197). Having lived long on friendly terms with death in most of his works, he now faces its prospect calmly, given his age. But he should like it to be a light death and therefore asks his readers to pray to the goddess on his behalf that he may hear Tyagaraja's devotional song "You are my refuge" when his time comes (1984: 322).

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