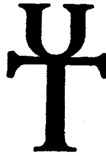

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TAGARI SHIVASHANKARA PILLAI : *Under the Mango Tree*

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Introduction by PAUL FRIEDRICH

MODERN INDIA CONTAINS NEARLY A SCORE OF INDEPENDENT LITERARY traditions, most of them associated with distinct languages and some of them differing more from each other than from related literatures in ad-

jacent nations. Among such quasi-national currents a particularly distinguished place is occupied by fictional work in the Malayalam language of Kerala in the southwest, where over the past forty years a small group of gifted bilingual writers, quite at home in English, have gradually freed their mother tongue from the ornate and artificial imitation of Sanscrit models and gone ahead to create a comparatively simple idiom based on the natural conversation of cultivated society. While Christians and Moslems have certainly figured in this movement, the majority of formative individuals have been upper-caste Hindus of rural background, either Brahmins or members of the anthropologically interesting Nayar community. Tagari Shivashankara Pillai is such a Nayar and one of India's most celebrated authors.

Tagari was a child prodigy at reciting the Hindu folk tales and myths that still thrive as a largely oral tradition in every Nayar household; the Malayalam short story, though technically a Western genre, remains permeated with the ideas and values of this native world view. As a young man he achieved renown for anacreontic and at times pornographic sketches; the sensual qualities running through his many short stories such as "Under the Mango Tree" illustrate South Indian taste and sentiment more truly than the various predigested English-language writings that typically find their way to the American reader. In addition, Tagari, like most Malayalee writers, is more directly a child of the nineteenth century than his contemporaries in the West, finding inspiration in Romantic poets such as Shelley and in various shades of realism represented by Maupassant and Chekhov. As he once exclaimed, "When I get disgusted with recent books, I always have my Byron," or another time, "Dostojevesky! I have read every page of that man!" A further indication of this romanticism and absolute confidence in his own literary powers is that he writes only one draft and seldom reads proof; the nationally famous and prize-winning novel *Chemmeen* (published here by Harper & Brothers, 1962), dealing with the life of Kerala fishermen, was entirely completed in eight days. Despite high earnings—his novels sell out almost immediately—and growing celebrity in India, Eastern Europe, and the Orient, he continues to live in his country home, supporting a large family and serving locally as a lawyer; his deepest inspiration has been the walks home by twilight through the rice fields and the "native intelligence" of his shy wife, who has seldom been more than a mile from their home and her own matrilineal household nearby. The short story "Under the Mango Tree" is widely regarded as his best, and has also provided the title for a Tagari anthology used in the Kerala public schools.

Any literature poses immense problems for the translator especially when one must enter into the world of children, an area where many Indian writers perform at their best. The complex of cultural meaning—of redundancies from the native point of view—can sometimes be included in the running translation when operating between languages and cultures closely akin such as Tamil and Malayalam; but between the widely separate worlds of American English and Nayar Malayalam the number of foreign ideas becomes so great that the translator tends to traduce the original by omitting crucial references or by interlarding the text with anthropological definitions. The present solution has been to present the story in its simple, original form

with such cutting and transposition as was dictated by minimal criteria of style and organization, and then to provide context through fairly extensive footnotes that include concrete definitions, abstract descriptions of culture patterns and inferences about Nayar emotions and ideas. The reader is advised to go through "Under the Mango Tree" as it stands. Then he can refer to the footnotes and return for a final reading: a Malayalee trying to comprehend Faulkner has to go through an analogous process.

"Under the Mango Tree" (*Mañjuvattil*)[1]

"Under the Mango Tree" (*Mañjuvattil*)[1]

A wind is no wind!
A big wind is no wind!
Come on, sea!
Come on, wind, from the Malvelli Hills[2]
Having touched the ocean, give us a mango!

Then a wind blew. In the branches of that male mango tree touching the sky full bunches were swaying at rest.

Their enthusiasm increased. Joining hands they shouted joyfully, "Come on, Wind! Come on, sea!"

The wind grew stronger. Something made a rustling sound as it plummeted through the foliage. Suddenly the song came to an end and for a moment there was a hubbub under the mango tree. A girl snatched up the object. Explosive laughter; it was a poisonous fruit. With a blanched face she hurled it far away, as someone laughed loudly. A boy appeared upon the scene and at once the children erupted into laughter. The girl burst into tears.

Intent on his prank, the boy (whose name was Balan) clambered froglike into a *pera* tree which stood nearby.[3] He took a mango from a leaf basket hanging on a branch and hurled it down before the girl.[4] For a moment she hesitated to take it. As she was bending over another boy took it away and again, in unison, there came a detonation of laughter.

The children began to play. Gauri and Narayan took the pebbles one by one and started a set of "singles and doubles." Nani and Gowindan were preparing rice gruel and vegetable curry while Shiva and Rama celebrated the funeral of "Father Fruit-stone."[5] They built a palanquin with little, dry twigs, placed a mango inside, and performed a temple procession[6] around the mango tree.

"Father Fruit-stone has already died!"

"For sixteen days we took the ritual baths!"[7]

"Give us a mango to celebrate the funeral feast!"

Above a crow cawed. The children stopped their games, and the boy who had climbed and perched in the *pera* tree jumped to the ground. It was a baby crow! It was no mother crow!

"Hey! Did you see it pecking the mango? Keep still or it will fly away."[8]

They all remained peering upwards. The girl who had been mocked—her name was Paapi—stood nearby with a dejected look on her face.[9] The boy, Balan, got the fruit this time. Plucking out the stem he threw it into the tree and said:

"Give Paapi another mango after you have sucked out the juice from this one!"[10]

This is the formula children use: "Give me another mango!" So the boy made up for his incidental mischief, and Paapi got the second fruit stem.

When twilight had darkened into night the children dispersed from under the mango tree. Balan and Paapi started home hand in hand. A basket filled with fruit was hanging from his wrist. She had not found even one that day.

They were neighbors, with her house lying to the west of his. At the next annual ceremony to Saraswati both of them were made to sit down and study writing with palm leaf and stylus.[11] Together they would go to the school of Master Kittu and return together, giving each other the medicinal *kayoni* plant to rub on a palm leaf. He would pluck a lotus flower from the temple pool and give it to Paapi.

She was a dunce and got nothing but blows from the teacher. But in one way she did excell. She would ask, "On the opposite shore stands the tipmost leaf of a coconut. And this tipmost leaf of another coconut is standing on this bank. The ends touch, joined together. Tell me what it is."

The boy couldn't figure out riddles.[12] He would say, "A coconut."

"Oh, never! A riddle . . ." she would say as she won, laughing and clapping her hands.

"Then what is it?"

"Eyelids—now there are four riddles!"

They used to pummel each other. He would scratch her and she made monkey faces at him through her tears.

"I won't ever speak to you again!" she exclaimed.

Conscious of her aristocratic lineage, she added,[13]

"And we will never eat your rice!"

But for him there was also one thing to be proud of: "I will be sure to study English!"[14]

She stopped going to school after six months of lessons, her mother's brother saying "She should not go. If women study they will ask about the accounts." Next year the boy was entered in primary school. He took his slate and his book, wrapped a little cotton sheet around his waist, and trotted off while she stood gazing at him.

One day she asked, "Balan, does the teacher beat you in school?"

"He would beat me if I did not study."

During the mango season Paapi used to collect the fruits for Balan and store them carefully in a certain place, giving them to him when he came home in the evening. She had lots of work—to kindle the fire, to remove cow dung from the sheds, to polish the dishes with sand and water; not even time to play. Having finished primary studies Balan entered the English School four miles away. He donned a shirt

for the first time in his life and went off to A— with his father.[15] She stood like an image of stone, watching.

"Oh, Balan, will you come back again?"

"I'll come back on Friday." Paapi burst into tears; he was going to live in A—, and the little girl became downhearted. But when the boy returned on Friday evening she gave him a basketful of mangos. That year the monsoon was especially fearful, with heavy floods,[16] so that he did not come home for one and a half months. Every Friday she waited but to no avail. When he did finally return after the recession of the flood waters another little boy was with him. Saturday passed without his going to her house, and she had no time to visit him. On Sunday she found him studying English with his friend.

After four years of intermediate schooling Balan entered high school and came home for the following *Oonam* vacation. Paapi perceived a citified gentleman requesting a porter to take his suitcase and then entering the "Eastern House."[17] She dropped in, on the pretense of borrowing a bunch of cumin seed. It was Balan, but for a moment she could not recognize him because his tuft of hair had been completely cut off and he was groomed in the Western style, his hair combed and set with sesame oil.[18] A few pimples had sprouted on his face, now turned pale, with pinkish spots.[19] Even his voice had changed. He was wearing elegant sandals, carried a cloth umbrella,[20] and she could see sundry interesting articles inside his trunk. The boy's smile had a peculiar charm. "Mother: I'm hungry!" Having said this he walked into the kitchen. Paapi was there wearing a knee-length apron black with charcoal.

"What say, Paapi?" Balan asked. She didn't answer.

The vacation ended and it was time for Balan to return. Ordering someone to carry his suitcase, he started off. While passing beneath the male mango tree he had the feeling that someone was calling. He turned and stood still. Paapi was standing under a jasmine tree in front of the Gunter temple.[21]

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes."

A gentle feeling welled up within him as he walked on; something impossible to define had been carried within that voice. It had been like a premonition.

During the midsummer vacation Balan stayed at home only a few days before going to see his sister, who was living in the northern part of the state. When he came home in midsummer the following year, he was seventeen years old. The mango crop was extraordinary.[22] Coming back from town he used to stroll under the old mango tree, dressed in an undershirt, the children singing the ancient song:

"Come on, wind! Come on, sea!"

"Father Fruit-stone" had new relatives now but Paapi would still run with the children when a mango fell while, a short distance away under the tree, Balan stood watching the pleasant sight. Paapi was really a small girl, even then. If she got a mango she would pluck out the stem, throw it upwards, and say:

"You, having taken this stem, give me another!"

One day in the evening Balan was walking slowly back and forth under the mango tree. All the children had already gone. A wind was blowing but Balan did not know where it came from. Paapi appeared. A fruit fell. She picked it up.

"Paapi, please give me that mango and let me have a look at it." She gave it to him.

"You used to get lots of mangos, didn't you?" he asked.

"I used to get all of them, and I would bring them all to your house."

"That's right. And just today I had mango curry. Was it from your mangos?"

"I brought one hundred and fifty mangos on the day your mother said you were coming, the tenth of the month."

Singing a tune in a low voice he walked away, diffusing a fragrant scent. Some embroidery had been worked into the corner of the handkerchief which he was holding with his finger tips.[23] Paapi stood watching him. So the vacation ended.

He did not come home for Oonam or Christmas, but only when the public examinations had ended; he was in the final form and studying with the desire of getting a scholarship.

As in old times they met one evening under the mango tree. She had finished bathing early. Her hair was loose and thrown back and she had wrapped about a clean white skirt with a black border. The skirt reached up to her waist. He looked at her carefully, and for the first time in her life she trembled before him. She was eighteen years old.

A faint breeze blew, like an expiration of the Gunter temple standing above them at the edge of the greenish pool. A murmuring sound emerged from the serpent grove. Her head was bent down, while a smile of increasing brightness played over her face—the manifestation of beauty-making shyness on the countenance of a woman. Balan took two steps forward. Paapi crossed her arms.[24] Balan caught one of her hands and pressed it gently. She raised her face and their eyes met. The next moment he loosened his hold. She vanished.

After that she never visited the mango tree. She importuned her mother for an old-fashioned white blouse that she wanted,[25] and on seeing Balan would run away and hide.

Balan passed the finals and entered a college in Trivandrum.[26] His world broadened: city friends and urbane young women. Memories of the past were submerged and buried beneath the attractions of his new life. In that same year during vacation Balan and some Madras friends made the grand tour of all South India,[27] and on his return home for Oonam the following year there were also several friends along. When they descended into the rice fields to saunter in the fresh air, Balan saw Paapi standing under the mango tree wearing a stylish, spotted jacket.

At the end of four years Balan took his bachelor's degree and married the daughter of a richly pensioned officer in Trivandrum. Members of his district society greatly praised the physical beauties of the bride upon their return from the wedding.[28] One day he came home with his wife, and left her to reside in the country while he jour-

neyed to England. The citified young lady used to take the air under the mango tree in the twilight; her master[29] had gone and continued to dwell in that far country beyond the saffron beauty of the western sky. On the occasion of his departure he had made many promises but her heart was constantly muddied by anxiety;[30] lacking both education and charm, she never once had been able to make her husband happy. He had been wont to say that English women are made the most attractive and lovable by their smiles. And aren't the vows made to a poor girl in Trivandrum going to be forgotten during a life in London overflowing with gaiety? She prayed to God that He would graciously listen to her supplications and remedy her humble state; all her letters were written in tears. "Don't forget the promise you made to me," she used to write. "Please don't feel displeasure at my anxieties. I do not understand anything. I am a simple girl. I have no authority to advise you, but I always pray for your prosperity." She would remember his caresses; his black, knit eyebrows and the shape of his body used to appear before her mind's eye. He was her own treasure.

Tears filled her eyes as she stood immersed in thought. Paapi, standing nearby in a short, working frock, gazed with interest at everything about her, at the ornaments, at the lengthened skirt reaching to her feet. She was a wife for the gods, a creature of divine beauty. Slowly approaching, Paapi asked, "Why are you crying?" The Trivandrum lady only looked at her once, disdainfully.

Balan returned four years later and was appointed judge in the High Court. His village progressed because it had the fortune to be the birthplace of a distinguished judge; the road from A— to Trivandrum passed through the place, and an English school and one or two small factories are located there now.

But today the children still gather under the mango tree.

"Come on, wind! Come on, sea!"

The great poet of these lines is unknown; grandfathers and grandmothers forget them during the middle period of life, during the eventful years of adulthood. The song may be remembered now and then but they cannot name the composer.

The walls of the Gunter temple have cracked open, the roof has fallen in. Fruits of the male mango tree have shrunken to the size of a small medicinal plant; children can put two mangos in their mouths at once.

One evening a car drove up and from inside there stepped a man nearly fifty years old, his hair already turned white. It was Balan. The villagers gathered respectfully behind the venerated judge,[31] who walked toward the tree, questioning them about their welfare.

The old tree played host; a mango dropped down in front of him. Some children ran forward, but the judge had already taken it. He looked upward. The box-shaped bunches were swaying, touched by the wind.

"Balan!"

London, with the siren calls of its machines, a happy home with the sweet smile of a loving wife, the full gravity of a judicial chair—through all his eventful life there burst this message of his carefree boyhood to beat like a wave against his eardrums.

A skeletal form with a wholly wrinkled body looked at him and smiled.[32] There was not a tooth in her mouth. The judge stared back.

A wind is no wind!
A big wind is no wind!
Come on, sea!
Come on, wind, from the Malvelli Hills!
Having touched the ocean, give us a mango!

So the children sang.[33]

NOTES

1. *Mañjuvattil,* by Tagari Shivashankara Pillai, Trivandrum, 1946.
2. (māwēli), the "good demon," is Kerala's culture hero, who formerly ruled Malabar. Jealous of him, the gods sent the great Vishnu who, knowing that the former would grant a boon to a Brahmin, turned himself into one, and asked for whatever three feet would cover, which was agreed. Vishnu then expanded and covered the land with one foot, the sea with a second step, and, with the third, the middle air. Māwēli was sent to the underworld. His parting boon was granted, however, and he is permitted to return to Kerala once a year, the occasion of the great *Oonam* festival.
3. (pēr), the small fruits of this short tree are eaten by children.
4. (yeriññyugodunu), this verb, compounded of two roots, is exemplified by the contemptuous gesture made by Namboodiri Brahmins when throwing down sandalwood powder and so forth (prasādam), on a rock before the Nayars in the temple. The Namboodiris, constituting about one per cent of the population, are one of the most sacred Brahmin castes in all India. A patrilateral group, they used to be linked hypergamously with the Nayars (and still are in many rural areas).
5. (andi), literally "nut," also meaning "scrotum."
6. (pradakšinam), literally "moving to the right," Hindu religious procession around the inside or outside of a temple, clockwise, always an odd number of times.
7. (pulaguli), the sons and "nephews," but no females, or males older than the deceased, observe sixteen days of purificatory rites, bathing but *not* anointing themselves with oil; no such "relative" may enter the temple, and the eldest son must remain within the family compound performing special *pujas.* Funeral rites remain one of the major customs by which the matrilineal values of the Nayars are periodically redefined.
8. The entire phraseology here is "pure Malayalam" children's language, especially the term for "mother," (talla). The usual kinship term is (amma), and the hypercharistic particle (–aŋ–) in (kuññyāŋgakkayān*a*l), and (–āde) instead of (–erud*a*) as negative suffix. The friendly and curious crows of Kerala are liked by children and figure rather positively in the folklore.
9. Literally, "the countenance of the girl who had suffered loss of face." The Malayalam word (iliphyata) more specifically means "embarrassment caused by an unsuccessful attempt," and, second, "shame at public ridicule." Such "mocking" predominates as a means of social control, also among children.
10. These are fixed formulae used among children as part of their remarkably distinct dialect (with scores of special words). The juice referred to is the few drops of greyish-white fluid that exudes from the fruit after the stem is plucked out. It (cena) also figures in the idiom for pregnancy.
11. Pujas, or votive offerings, are made every September, in the Malayalam month of

(kaññyi) to Saraswati, consort of Brahma and the Goddess of Learning; orange flowers are sprinkled over the family books. Two days later the children are sent to the local teacher (āsan), who first makes the child trace the letters of the alphabet on rice meal.

12. Malayalam children are fond of riddles, although I did not have time to fully explore this matter; it would seem that they play with riddles more than American children but less than Russian peasants.
13. Here (kudumbam), meaning in this case a nonlocalized matrilineal descent group running back some five to seven generations to a known ancestor. Hereditary warriors before the advent of the British, the Nayars now constitute a rural gentry and urban professional caste, still proud of their aristocratic blood; an upper-upper class Nayar might refuse the rice [here (cōr*a*) or "cooked rice"] of a declassé Nayar. The most common cause for physically punishing children is the failure to observe caste distinctions. Until recently the Nayars were organized in extended households (taravād*a*) with a core of three to five generations of women related to each other through women. These matrilineal aggregations of mothers, daughters, grandmothers, mothers' sisters, and so forth, were ruled, rather dictatorially in some cases, by the eldest brother of the oldest woman (the ammāvan, called the (kāranavan) in his capacity as house chief). Men visited their wives and consorts in other households by night but resided with their mothers and sisters.
14. Tremendous prestige attaches to the study of English, and fluent command of same.
15. The important entry into higher schools is marked by such sartorial transitions.
16. (velloppōkkam) or "high water"; in Tagari's district and many other low-lying coastal areas the monsoon often means disaster, paralyzing transportation and flooding the hovels of lower-caste workers. One poet has written the famous lines:

    "Without *Oonam,* the monsoon, the green wet rice fields,
    And Erittachen,
    I cannot imagine a Kerala."

    Erittachen is the greatest Malayali poet (translator of the epic, *Rāmāyana,* into medieval Malayalam).
17. The four houses adjoining a rural Nayar home are identified by the four quarters; Balan lived in the "Eastern House" (kilakk*a*) just as Paapi was west of Balan. Otherwise, settlement is often continuous, with few sharp breaks between villages and districts.
18. (kuduma), Nayar men used to wear a tuft or queue on the front part of their head; many Namboodiris still do.
19. (veluttucuvann*a*), literally "white and red," although in terms of the American perception of color the meaning would probably be "light swarthy with some pinkish hue"; this citified complexion, in any case, is felt to be "superior" to the dark country brown.
20. Country Nayars go barefoot or wear rude sandals; until recently they, like the Brahmins, used umbrellas of palm leaf thatch.
21. (gentheravan), the Gunter are minor Hindu deities, musicians of the Deva group. These small, local temples are usually brown and white, with many-faceted stone exteriors. Adjoining the temple there often lies, set in stone, a greenish, ceremonially pure pool in which the people bathe and wash their clothes.
22. Malayalam is an agglutinative, polysynthetic language, fundamentally different from English. This sentence, for example, consists of three overt forms: (other-time-in-never) (mango) (present-having-never).
23. The young, urban gentleman in Kerala powders and perfumes himself.

24–1. Meaning that she crossed her arms over her breasts, putting one hand on each shoulder. This is a characteristic gesture of South Indian women, often assumed while they are talking or standing idly.

24–2. Cobras and statuettes of cobras are worshipped in small groves by Brahmins and Nayars. This beautiful reptile functions as the totem of the latter caste (Bhagavati, the consort of Shiva, is their principal deity).

24–3. From "A faint breeze blew . . ." to this point 20/39 of the words are "felt" as Sanskrit, contrasting with the less than five per cent of such Sanskrit words on most preceding pages. "Sanskrit" here does not necessarily mean "etymologically of Sanskrit origin;" a word such as (stri), "woman," has been completely incorporated into colloquial Malayalam and is now the standard term for its referent. Compare the first sentence in the story, (appōl uru kātadiccu. ā varikkyamāvinde mānatta muttuna kombugalil pettikulagal kidannādunu), containing not a single "Sanskrit word," with (uru marmarasabdam udirnu. pāppiyude mukham avanadamāyi. strigalude mukhatte agaršamākkuna lejjeyude pragadanam. uru pragāšameriya mandahāsam). The foregoing passages are not marked for stress and external sandhi. At moments of romantic intensity the writer moves unselfconsciously into the more elevated speech forms. Neither the author nor the translator was at first aware of the abrupt shift in style at this point, although the former is opposed on principle to the use of Sanskritized language.

25. The so-called (raukka) blouse, covering the back, is buttoned at the throat, with two front pieces knotted together in front just beneath the breasts, leaving an open line down the center.

26. The state capital, population about 180,000; literally "sir-snake-city," after the famous statue of a thousand-headed cobra in the main temple.

27. Upper-class young men generally make such tours of South India during their adolescent years, visiting the temples especially.

28. The (kara) is an important type of Nayar society comprising about 2–300 families in any one district, with important social and political functions; all members would be invited to a major wedding.

29. (nāthan), "master" or "lord," is used to indicate great respect toward the husband; the third, or most respectful form of the third, person singular is always used in references to her husband.

30. (ulkalam), "heart," has in part the meaning of "inner ground" in Malayalam and hence is "darkened" or "muddied." The descriptive compound here means "anxiety-muddied," and "anxiety" when analyzed means "inner neck." The expression in question thus may be analyzed as inner ground-inner neck-muddied.

31. (jesaji adēham), "His Reverence, the Judge," also used in what follows.

32. "smiled warmly;" (ullukulurkke), "to be inside," but a fuller translation of this really untranslatable adverb would be "cool," and therefore "sincerely, cordially, heartily," because these qualities are felt to be "cool," just where a European might use "warm." "We like coolness—this is a hot country." The old woman is Paapi, of course.

33. To some extent these footnotes constitute an introduction to the main points of Nayar culture. Indian names have been transcribed with letters of the English alphabet so that the most accurate pronunciation would be suggested; thus the standard digraph "sh," rather than /s/ is used for Shiva.