

## In a Forest, a Deer (1994)

By Ambai (India)

Translated from the Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström

It is difficult to forget those nights. Nights when we listened to all those stories. Thangam Athai, it was, who told them to us. They were not tales of the fox and the crow, nor of the hare and the tortoise. No, these were stories she herself had made up. Some were like fragments of poetry. Others were like songs which would never end. Stories which developed in all sorts of ways, without beginning, middle, or end. At times, at night, she would create many images in our minds. Even the gods and demons would alter in her stories. She would speak most movingly about Mandara.<sup>1</sup> Surpanaka,<sup>2</sup> Tadaka,<sup>3</sup> and the rest would no longer remain as rakshasis, female demons, but be transformed into real people with impulses and feelings. She brought into the light characters which had seemed only to cling to the pages of the epics. As if she were stroking a bird with broken wings, with such gentleness she would portray them in words. I don't know what it was about them-- the night-time, or the central hail of that old house where we lay, or the nearness of all the cousins-- but those stories still keep circling and sounding somewhere in my mind, like the buzzing of bees.

In that house with its old pillars and central hail, I see Thangam Athai in several frames. Leaning against the heavy wooden door. Carrying a small lamp which she has shaded with the end of her sari; placing it within its niche. Serving a meal to her husband, Ekambaram. Pulling on a rope, one foot firmly placed upon the small parapet surrounding the well. Feeding the plants with manure.

Thangam Athai had beautiful dark skin. A face without a single wrinkle, as if it had been ironed smooth. Plenty of silver in her



Ambai  
(pseudonym of C. S. Lakshmi)  
born 1944

---

<sup>1</sup> [translator's note] the nurse, who was the chief instigator of Kaikeyi's jealousy of Rama

<sup>2</sup> [translator's note] *rakshasi*, sister of Ravana

<sup>3</sup> [translator's note] *rakshasi*, mother of Maricha

hair. There was an old-fashioned harmonium<sup>4</sup> in Athai's house, worked by pressing a pedal. Athai used to play it. She would play different tunes, from the *tevaram*<sup>5</sup> 'Vadaname chandrabimbamo' to the popular 'Vannaan vandaana,' singing softly at the same time. Her long fingers which looked like the dark beaks of birds would fly over the keys of the harmonium as if they were black butterflies.



harmonium

A shell of mystery surrounded Thangam Athai. There seemed to be a deep pity for her in the way the others looked at her with tenderness, or stroked her gently; it was there in the compassion flowing from their eyes. Ekambaram Maama<sup>6</sup> had another wife. He always treated Athai as if she were a flower. Nobody had overheard him address her as 'di'.<sup>7</sup> He would always call her Thangamma.<sup>8</sup> All the same, Athai seemed, somehow, as if she stood a long distance away, behind a smokescreen. It was Muthu Maama's daughter, Vail, who pierced the mystery. What she found out was both comprehensible to us, and yet totally incomprehensible. According to Valli's mother, Athai had never 'blossomed'.

'What does that mean?' several of us wanted to know.

Valli was old enough to wear a half-sari.<sup>9</sup> 'Well, it means that she never came of age.'

'But her hair is all white, isn't it?'

'That's different.'

After that we watched Athai's body carefully. We discussed among ourselves how a body that hadn't 'blossomed' would be. We couldn't understand in what way her body wasn't complete. Athai looked just like everyone else when she appeared in her wet clothes, after her bath. When she stood there in her knotted red choli<sup>10</sup> and her green sari, she didn't look at all unusual. Valli's mother had said to Vail, 'It's just a hollow body.' We couldn't make out where the gap could be. We wondered if it was like the broken wing of a sparrow, a hollow that wasn't overtly discernible.

One evening they cut down a huge tree in the garden, which had died. At the last blow of the hatchet, it suddenly slid down to the ground amidst a rustling of leaves. When it was split across, there

<sup>4</sup> a keyboard instrument in which the notes are produced by air driven through metal reeds by foot-operated bellows

<sup>5</sup> [translator's note] The collected devotional songs, 8000 in all, in praise of Shiva, composed in the seventh and eighth centuries by the saints Appar, Sundararamurti Nayanar, and Tirugnanasambandar.

<sup>6</sup> Tamil: "uncle"

<sup>7</sup> a grammatical suffix used to informally address a female

<sup>8</sup> The -ammā suffix is much more formal, denoting a "lady" (usually an older woman or someone with a higher status)

<sup>9</sup> The half-sari (*pavadai davani* in Tamil) is a "training" sari worn by adolescent girls in South India to ease the transition to the six yard sari worn by adult women.

<sup>10</sup> a midriff-baring blouse or upper garment in the Indian sari

was a mere hole within. Valli nudged me at the waist and said, 'That's it, that's hollow.' But it was impossible to compare Athai's shining dark form with this tree, lying there facing the sky, exposing itself utterly, nothing inside.

What secret did that form hide?

In what way was her body so different? In the hot summer afternoons, Athai would remove her tight choli and lie down in the store-room. When we went and snuggled close to her, laying our heads against her breast, freed now from its confining choli, she would gather us up in a light embrace. Held within the protection of her breast, her waist, her arms, it was difficult to perceive any hollow. Hers was a temperately warm body. She seemed like one steeped in feelings and emotions. Like a ripe fruit full of juice, a life-spring flowed through her body. And often those vitalizing drops fell upon our own selves.

Through her touch, through her caress, through the firm pressure with which she massaged us with oil, a life-force sprang towards us from her body, like a river breaking past its own banks. It was at the touch of her hands that cows would yield their milk. The seeds that she planted always sprouted. My mother always said she had an auspicious hand.



Athai was there when my little sister was born. Akka,<sup>11</sup> stay by my side. Keep holding on to me. Only then will I not feel any pain Amma muttered, as we children were being swept out of the room. When we came to the threshold and looked back from the doorway, Thangam Athai was softly stroking Amma's swollen belly.

'Nothing will happen. Don't be frightened,' she said quietly.

'Oh, Akka, if only you too could...,' my mother sobbed, unable to finish what she began.

'What do I need? I'm like a queen. My house is full of children,' said Athai.

Ekambaram Maama's younger wife had seven children. 'Your body has not opened...,' Amma wept the louder.

'Why, what's wrong with my body? Don't I feel hungry at the right times? Don't I sleep well? The same properties that all bodies have, this one has, too. It feels pain when it is hurt. Its blood clots. If its wounds go septic, it gathers pus. It digests the food it eats. What more do you want?' asked Athai.

Amma took her hand and laid it against her cheek.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tamil: "older sister"

'They turned your body into a bloody battlefield....,' she moaned, holding that hand tight.

Valli's mother had told Valli that there was no medicine left that they had not tried on Athai's body. If any physician came to town, most definitely he would be asked to prescribe for Athai. It seems they even tried English medicine on her. It seems that at times she would take these medicines and fall into such a deep and heavy sleep.

It seems that for a few months they made puja<sup>12</sup> with neem leaves<sup>13</sup> and the sound of the udukku drum.<sup>14</sup> In the hope that something might happen if she were suddenly startled, a dark figure wrapped in a black cloth once sprang on her when she was alone in the backyard. Screaming with the shock, Athai fell down, hitting her head against the washing-stone. The scar is still there, on the edge of her forehead. When the next physician came to her, it seems Athai cried out, 'Leave me alone. Leave me alone.' The evening after they had been to see a prospective second wife for Ekambaram, it seems Athai swallowed a mixture of ground arali<sup>15</sup> seeds. They gave her an antidote, and somehow managed to resuscitate her. After that, Ekambaram had wept and said, 'I don't want anything for myself that will cause you pain.' Then Athai herself sought out a bride for him. And that was how Senkamalam came to live in that house. All these were details collected by Valli.



udukku

Without removing her hand from Amma's clasp, Athai stroked her head with her other hand. 'Leave it. Leave it now. Let it all go. Why think of my story at this time when you are giving birth?' she said. It was that very night that my little sister was born.

It was some time later, on one occasion when we were visiting her house, that she told us the story.

It was the rainy season. On one side of the living room, the *jamukkalams*<sup>16</sup> had been spread and a few pillows encased in pillowcases with stubborn hair-oil stains were scattered about. And there were some pillows without pillowcases. These were made of heavy cotton in dark colours, stuffed with cottonwool. Here and there the cottonwool had knotted into lumps. These were not the pillows in daily use. They were kept for the use of the children of occasional visitors. Were the lumps and knots going to matter, after all, to children who played all day long and went to sleep with full bellies?

We could hear the sound of the kitchen being washed down. Then we heard the clang of the brass pot, the creaking of the door, the

---

<sup>12</sup> a Hindu prayer ritual

<sup>13</sup> [translator's note] tree known for medicinal and antiseptic properties of its leaves, (*Melia azadirachta*)

<sup>14</sup> [translator's note] small drum used in exorcism rituals

<sup>15</sup> [translator's note] oleander

<sup>16</sup> [translator's note] thickly woven cotton mats

soft thump of the coconut-frond broom being banked against it. A tin box clinked. That would be the tin in which the kolam powder was kept. The kolam would now be traced upon the hearth.<sup>17</sup> After that, having shut the kitchen door, Athai must come this way through the living-room. Not one of us was asleep. We waited.

As soon as she came by us, Somu began.

'Athai, won't you tell us a story... Athai?'

'Aren't you asleep, any of you?'

She stood there and watched us awhile, then she came closer and sat down. Kamakshi and Somu crept up to her immediately, put their heads upon her lap and lay on either side of her, gazing up at her. The rest of us leaned our elbows against our pillows.

Athai was tired. The sweat gleamed upon her forehead. She shut her eyes and thought for a moment.

'It was a huge forest,' she began.

'In that forest, all the animals lived together, happily. There were lots of fruit trees there. A small stream ran through it, to one side. If ever they felt thirsty, they would drink from it. Whatever any of the animals wanted, it was all there, exactly as they wished, in that forest. In that forest, they never feared the hunter. All those animals roamed about freely, never afraid that a sudden arrow might pierce them, or that they might lose their lives. Like any other forest, it was not without such things as forest fires, or trespassers coming from elsewhere to cut down the trees, or to steal the fruit, or even to shoot at the birds, or to strike at the fleeing wild pig. All the same, it was a forest to which the birds and animals had become accustomed. Indeed, they knew it well. They knew on which tree the owl would alight, and how it would hoot at nights when the entire forest lay silent; they knew on which stone the frog would sit and make its sudden croaking noise as if it were lapping water; they knew the places where the peacock danced.

'Everything went on like this until one day when a herd of deer went to drink water. As they walked on, following the water, one of the deer was separated from the rest. Suddenly it found itself in a different forest. It seemed to be a forest which had no



hearth with kolam design

---

<sup>17</sup> [translator's note] kolam: rice flour designs made on the floor or around the hearth



pathways at all through it. There were marks on all the trees where arrows had penetrated them. Within the forest, a waterfall sounded with a loud flourish. The place wore a desolate look, as if there wasn't a soul about. The deer felt its whole body shudder with fear. Crying out loudly that

this was not the place it knew, it wandered the entire forest, leaping about in its panic. It grew dark. The deer couldn't bear the terror of it. The waterfall's sound was frightening. In the distance, a hunter had lit a fire and was eating the roasted flesh of the animal he had killed. The deer could see the sparks from that fire. It hid itself. It sank down, exhausted from having gone round and round that forest, all alone.

'It wandered about in this way for many days. And then it was the night of the full moon. Moonlight filled the forest. Spread with moonlight, the waterfall had taken on a different form. A form that was no longer frightening. The moonlight touched everything softly, gently. Suddenly, as if a magic rod had been laid upon it, the deer's terror disappeared entirely. It began to like this forest. It began to learn all its nooks and crannies. Even though it was a different place, this forest, too, contained everything. There was the waterfall. There were all the trees and plants. Slowly, gradually, its eyes discerned all the animals and birds. It could see the beehives hanging from the trees. It saw the freshness of the green grass. The deer understood all the secrets of this new forest. And after that it walked around the entire forest without fear. The deer's terror had all gone and it was at peace.'

Athai finished her story. All the rest of the living-room was in darkness. Only this part was lit up. As we children listened to the story, we imagined that the dark parts of the room were the forest; we made friends with the deer, and now we too were at peace. Hugging our pillows, we fell asleep. As I fell back against my pillow with its rough cover of dark blue and yellow and black, and opening a single eye, looked upwards, half-asleep, I saw Thangam Athai sitting in our midst, leaning forward with her knees drawn up, her arms across her chest, and her hands clasping her shoulders.