

Tree, My Guru

Ismail



Translated by
D. Kesava Rao

Tree, My Guru

1960-1986

ISMAIL (1928-2003)

Poet and critic- wrote more than a dozen books of poetry & criticism and changed the landscape of Telugu poetry forever with his deep imagery and refreshing language. His adherence to silence in poetry and lone battle against Marxists won him wide audience but no awards. In his final years, he achieved, Zen like simplicity and wrote Haiku poems like the Japanese master poets. His life-long association with Kakinada, a sleepy coastal town where he taught philosophy, ended when he died from cancer, undiagnosed. His poetry is translated into French and Spanish in addition to English and other Indian languages.

D. KESAVA RAO (1937)

Translator of some important Telugu works into English. He collaborated with poet for five long years and came out with translations that are fresh, sensual and breathtakingly original with all nuances found in native Telugu, most musical of all Indian languages with millennium-old poetic tradition.

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Translated with Notes, by

D. Kesava Rao

Edited with Foreword, by

Yadukula Bhushan

Desi Books

New York

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Poetry in Translation

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Originally published in Telugu

Printed in India

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Composition by Vijetha Graphics

Printed at Kalajyothi Process Ltd

Cover Painting

Dr. Sanjiva Dev

USA \$12.00

India Rs.120

Desi Books

New York

desibooks@gmail.com

To C.P. Brown (1798-1884)

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"It is painful to look back upon talents too little improved, opportunities neglected, friends lost, wealth wasted, happiness rejected. I have received more favour and kindness than I deserved" – C.P.Brown

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to two people who have ungrudgingly guided and encouraged me: Ranga Rao, the celebrated writer and translator, and Dr. D. S. Rao, a scholar of repute and former Editor of Indian Literature. Their invaluable suggestions have greatly benefited me. And grateful thanks to Prof. K. Satchidanandan, a distinguished poet and critic, former Editor of Indian Literature and Secretary of Sahitya Akademi, for publishing many of these poems in Indian Literature and also for including some of these translations in Signatures (2000), the anthology he edited for National Book Trust, India. As always, the encouragement of Prof. C. Subba Rao, my teacher and former chairman of Andhra Pradesh Council of Higher Education, was something I could always depend on.

On Ismail's Poetry

Ismail greatly admired, among others, two poets: Devulapalli Krishna Sastry, whom he regarded as his mentor, and Rabindranath Tagore, the brightest star in our literary firmament. Ismail's early attempts were a false start and, like many in his generation, he too was influenced by the ideas that fascinated people who presumed that Heaven was close at hand. But, as a few perceptive thinkers in the West had done, he disowned the God that he thought had failed. After a quiet period of introspection, he once again began his journey of self-discovery through his writings. Ismail's work, like his mentor's, was perhaps politically not correct, yet to hold fast to his conviction in the literary ambience of his times needed a gutsy spirit. Freed from blinkers of all kinds, he found broader vistas to reflect on with a liberated mind, and he endeavoured to zealously preserve the literary space, which he thought was his first concern.

In a light-hearted moment, out of inquisitiveness, I taunted him to tell me how he came to like Tagore, whose poetry was rather ornate and dripped with fastidious refinement of style. He replied with his usual patience, "You may be right, but still he is a great poet," which clearly indicated his reverence to Tagore's poetry. He wrote two poems on Tagore (not included here), *Sada Balakundu Tagore* (Tagore the Eternal Child) and *Padma Nadilo Tagore* (Tagore in the river Padma) in which he celebrated Tagore and his work in the unique fashion which only he was capable of. Vico said that the eternal child in us was the cause of our everlasting joy. For Ismail

the eternal child in us is the motive force that impels us to write. The rationality that a person acquires as he grows old prevents him from asking such questions as "Why does the sun shine only on one side of the wall?" (*Van Gogh's Ear*). But in Ismail's poetic universe there is nothing irrational, nothing absurd about such a thought: it only calls for poetic exploration.

Ismail's voice is quiet and urbane, his poems are spare and brief, rarely lapsing into abstractions. The poetic conceits and the imagery he employs, as well as the natural matter-of-fact tone he uses, hides a profundity of thought that is the result of deep insight into reality, the outside world. *A Tortoise in the Well* may be cited as an example: apparently a simple, succinct poem, it raises on another level the problem of sense-perception. Brevity of expression was his banner, and he set much store by the present-day minimalist poetry (hence his explorations into the area of Haiku). Besides, he used to insist that the translation too should be as brief as the original. Rhetorical flourishes are alien to his poetry and he deliberately eschewed grandiloquent posturing.

Translating these poems had been a love of labour for me. He and I worked on them for over five years, communicating by snail mail (we never met, except once). But the collaboration was so close that at this stage it is difficult to extricate what really is my contribution. Some of the translations, published in the beginning, carried both of our names as translators. But he advised me not to use his name, since, as he said, he had only suggested a few alterations which I would not always agree to. However, whatever merit this translation has should

rightly belong to Ismail. What I gained was an invaluable grasp of how a poet's mind works, how he crafts the material on hand and turns it into invaluable pieces of art.

Though some of these poems had already appeared in different journals, it was poet's desire to see these translations published in book form, but that was not to be, in spite of our best efforts. Mr. Thammineni Yadukula Bhushan, is a software engineer stationed in the US and is a writer, critic and poet who has been doing some very good work for Telugu literature. He was a good friend of Ismail, and stayed with him during his terminal illness. Mr. Bhushan has also instituted an annual award to be given to a Telugu poet in Ismail's memory. Mr. Bhushan has taken it upon himself to bring out a bilingual edition of his poems. It is a matter of regret, however, that Ismail is not physically present here to witness the event, and I sincerely hope that he would bless this venture wherever he is. When, after several attempts, I despaired of ever bringing out the poems in book form, Mr. Bhushan has bailed me out of this situation, and I thank him for that.

Hindupur
Aug 2007

D. KESAVA RAO

The Eternal Child*

Those days can not be erased from memory: the days of innocence which knew that the soft morning sun, the cry of a bird and the flash of light in the beloved's eyes were somehow related, but were not quite sure how. What I knew for certain was the poetry of Bairagi, Tilak and Sri Sri; flashes of old poetry stashed away in the corners of memory, Indian poetics learnt with great effort, lexicons like *Amarakosam* committed to memory; Hindi poetry got by heart, rhymes of English poetry; the rhythmical poetry written under their influence, and the many translations done in a desultory fashion. It was the stage of life when the eyes opened to the poems of Walt Whitman. I used to wonder at the felicitous expression in the remarkable lines of Whitman: "Give me the splendid silent sun with his beams full-dazzling."

What was admitted to be true poetry in books, and the poems that the (Telugu) papers carried appeared to be quite dissimilar. All the papers with out exception were palming off journalistic stuff as true poetry. (There doesn't appear to be much difference even now, but that is beside the point). Poetry became a scarcity in many papers except for the rare translations done by poets like "Smile." In this chaotic situation, the Russian poet Brodsky elucidated what real poetry was, but his poetry left me unmoved. For me those were the dark days of groping and searching.

* Originally published in Telugu, *Sada Balakudu* (The Eternal Child) –Tr.

As usual, there was the annual book exhibition in Vijayawada. Excited, I bought books by the dozen. A plain-looking book with blue paper-covers captured my attention: *Ratri Vacchina Rahasyapu Vana* (The Secret Rain of the Night). I completed reading the book before I went to bed. I was overjoyed: a new kind of poetry that I hadn't seen in any language, approximating to the way I had chosen for expressing myself in verse. Immediately, I wrote a letter to the poet, posted it and completely forgot every thing about it. A few days later, a post-card written in green ink, came on wings like rain during the day and surprised me. "We take back what we give to the world," the post-card said. "Since you have poetry in you, my poems reflected it." Surprising—this detached composure. "Have your poems appeared in any magazines? Could you send me the clippings? Have you brought out a collection of your poems?" These lines astonished me even more. In the letter of a page or so I had written to him, I never mentioned anything about my poems. I had only written how happy I was reading his poems which appeared to be covering new ground. But, by his perspicacity, he could detect the water obtaining even in the lower most part of the world.

★ ★ ★

I wrote back telling him how disappointed I was with contemporary Telugu poetry, and how unwilling I was to send my poems to journals. "Please never forget in your life the oath you have made in your letter that you wanted

End of Preview.

**Rest of the book can be read @
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