**Ramaswamy, Sundara (1931-2005)**

A. R. Venkatachalapathy

Sundara Ramaswamy spent his early boyhood in Kottayam, Kerala. After his family’s return to Nagercoil in 1939 he lived there until his death. Nagercoil is at the cultural intersection of Tamilnadu and Kerala. This bilingual milieu is central to his writing, and he is one of the few Indian writers who are widely regarded in two linguistic cultures as their own.

Sundara Ramaswamy grew up “half-knowing” Malayalam, Sanskrit and English. An attack of juvenile arthritis saw him barely reach school final. Tamil he did not learn until he was eighteen. Sundara Ramaswamy was introduced to most Malayalam writers “at the first signs of the dawn of modernism in Malayalam literature.” His first literary endeavour was to translate Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s *Thottiyude Makan* into Tamil; subsequently he also translated *Chemmeen*.

Sundara Ramaswamy made his literary debut, in late 1951, with the publication of an edited volume in memory of Pudumaippittan (1906–1948), the fountainhead of Tamil prose modernity, who was an undying influence on his work.

In the early 1950s, Sundara Ramaswamy was drawn to the Communist Party of India and published his early fiction in some progressive literary journalsIn the years following 1956, he distanced himself from the left movement, identifying himself with an avant-garde modernism which functioned through the little magazines. This moment also coincided, with the growing chasm between literature appearing in mass magazines and in the little magazines, and a widening rift between progressive literature and the little magazines.

He is a stylist, employing a language, consciously crafted, shorn of traditional rhetorical devices, but brimming with satire, parody, humour and metaphor. Questioning tradition is an ever-present strand in his writing, and he took care not to invoke traditional literature in his writings.

Sundara Ramaswamy wrote about 75 short stories, and one can see definite shifts in his writing style and a determination not to repeat his artistic successes. He wrote three novels. *Oru Puliyamarathin Kathai* (*The Tale of a Tamarind Tree*), combines oral lore and history to narrate the story of change in a small town through the vicissitudes of a tamarind tree.

*J. J.: Sila Kurippukal* (*J J: Some Jottings*), in its form and content, and the studied mastery and precision of its language, and the sensitive and provocative formulation of ideas, was a rupture in the narrative tradition of Tamil fiction. The novel structured, complete with footnotes and appendices, as the biography of a fictional Malayalam writer, created a literary sensation.

*Kuzhandhaigal Pengal Aangal* (*Children, Women, Men*) is set in the few years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Transparently autobiographical, the long novel narrates incidents and ruminations in a Tamil Brahmin family in Kottayam. Underrated by readers and critics alike its artistry is deceptive, concealing great craftsmanship.

Sundara Ramaswamy turned to writing essays only in mid-career.. He also wrote free verse under the nom de plume Pasuviah: his early poems were part of the revived New Poetry (*Pudu Kavithai*) movement championed by the avant-garde *Ezhuthu*. In 1987 he launched a literary review, *Kalachuvadu* which folded up in two years, but was later revived in a different form by his son.

He died in in California.

**Time line**

1931: Born in Nagercoil

1939: Return to Nagercoil after eight years in Kottayam

1951: Publication of first short story

1966: First novel, *Oru Puliamarathin Kathai* is published

1966–1973: A hiatus in his writing

1981: *J.J.: Sila Kurippukal* is published

1987: Launches literary quarterly, *Kalachuvadu*

1990: Quits family business to devote time to full time writing

1998: *Kuzhandhaigal Pengal Aangal* is published

2005: Dies is California

**Bibliography**

*Oru Puliamarathin Kathai* (1966)

*J.J.: Sila Kurippukal* (1981)

*Kuzhandhaigal Pengal Aangal* (1966)

Sundara Ramaswamy Kavithaikal (2005, complete poems)

*Sundara Ramaswamy Sirukathaikal* (2006, complete shortstories)

*Mankkugai Oviyangal* (2011, complete non-fiction)