

THE QUEST

AND

OTHER POEMS

Original in Malayalam
by
G. SANKARA KURUP.

translation by
V. V. MENON.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

These poems were originally written in Malayalam by G. Sankara Kurup, one of the greatest living poets of Malabar. The present collection is by no means a representative one of Kurup's versatile sweep over Malayalam poetry; for his verse branches out into three different and distinct groups: the Classical, the Romantic and the Progressive. The Translations contained in this small book are representative only of the second group. A selection from this group has been made as the appeal of its subjects is wider and more universal and yet retains the essential elements of Malayalee culture and character. The opening poem, "The Quest", for instance, embodies the religious search of man for eternal peace. Again, in "My wedding", Kurup sees a spiritual wedding, Death, through the thin veil of a material one. To us in Malabar death is not an end, but a spiritual union of God. Kurup's religious mind, though perturbed, is not unprepared to welcome this union but longs to stay a little longer at home—the world. His hesitancy is not characterised by fear but by the disarmingly simple love of life which is so essentially the background of Malayalee character and culture.

I must confess that these translations are only a tentative to discover how the non-Malayalam knowing public will react to them. If the reception is encouraging it is certainly possible to prepare a more representative collection of Kurup's poems which are remarkable for

their exquisite imagery, wide appeal and warm sympathy of the oppressed. Though I cannot promise to translate his poems into a foreign language without losing some of their native charm I shall certainly try my best to retain as much as possible even at the cost of occasionally sounding “un-English”, as has been the case in certain portions of the present translation.

Bombay, }
6th February, 1947. }

V. V. Menon.

THE QUEST.

“ Impatient and possessed by love
Whom dost thou seek, little breeze,”
The Poet asked,
“ Without rest and without another thought
Like a madman dost thou run on
Heedless of day and night.
Seeing this mad restlessness of thine
The little flower stands bewildered
Looking up and down.
Is it words of Love
Thou art murmuring indistinctly ?
Is't love's intoxication making thee falter ?
To none but thee shall come
This ecstatic madness
Born of divine love, supreme;
Sooth, I am envious of thee ”.

“ Seek, seek, my friend,
Heed not the laughter of the bamboo groves,
For they are hollow, indeed”.

With broken sighs, softly caressing my body,
The wind replied:

“ Friend, you have guessed aright:
Here am I wandering
To catch a glimpse of my beloved.
We were parted long, long ago
But the memory of her stands betwixt
And disturbs my peace”

" When I awoke at the break of the first morn
 I saw Heaven and Earth standing still
 Looking at each other in mournful silence.
 I looked around and beheld me alone
 For, my beloved had departed,
 Perhaps to test my love,
 Leaving behind a few flowers
 That decked her hair,
 In the Heaven as stars".

" I heard the tinkling of her anklets when she moved
 But, alas, I mistook it for the song of the early birds.
 The crimson foot-prints of her tender feet
 Seemed to me but the glow of the breaking dawn.
 Her golden ring, thrown beside,
 I thought to be the fading moon, fool that I was!
 Her lovely kerchief, left behind as a token,
 I kept not, taking it to be a piece of white cloud.
 I did not kiss the drapery of the bed
 Ruffled under her gentle tread
 For, alas, I took it to be the waking sea".

" From then on, forgetting myself,
 I have been wandering
 In quest of that essence of Beauty.
 None on earth has seen her since
 Those who claim to have seen her
 Have not really seen her
 Hence must I persist in my quest.
 That embodiment of love that I seek,
 Some there be that deny Her existence.
 Believe them I cannot. "

" When I kiss the shy jasmine
 I recall the fragrance of her lovely face.
 When my parched lips touch the flowing brook
 The coolness of her tender cheeks
 At once breaks into my memory.
 If the beloved, whom I seek, exists not,
 Could her memory pain my mind like this ? "

"Even on the dewy bed
 Spread over the tender leaves of lovely creepers
 I find no peace of mind.
 That I will reach Her abode one day
 Is the one hope that keeps me on."

" At midnight I sink down wearied and senseless.
 Then silently my beloved creeps near.
 At Her soft touch, excited, I wake up:
 Alas! to weep, to weep again !! "

" Approaching the slumbering sea
 And waking him, I beseech:
 'Dear friend, tell me
 Where has my beloved gone. '
 The Ocean, perhaps taking me to be mad,
 Roars aloud displaying his foamy teeth.
 With anxious suspense
 How many times have I not put
 The same question to the Tree,
 Gently shaking him by the head ?
 Trembling, he gives no other reply than,
 'Tut, I have never seen Her'.
 When I fell down wailing in his lap,

The mountain lost in contemplation
Only pointed to the sky in reply.

“ And the sky itself stood silent as ever,
Thus making its answer clear !
That the agony of my separation
Should have no end ! ” .



THE SUNFLOWER.

Gently lifting up my shyly drooping face
The radiant Sun sweetly asked:
"Who art thou, young sister?
Why dost thou stand there, afar,
As my chariot rolls by,
Looking at me with unwinking gaze?
Thy look is full of yearning
Thy beautiful eyes opening wider, wider.
Wishest thou to tell me aught?
Forgive me if I have not guessed aright".

No answer could I think of.
Ah, how could I think of any?
For, there was the Sun,
Adored by all the world;
And here, a scentless flower!
'Sunflower' they call me,
In mockery,
Of my daring to love the God of light.
Divine love, soaring high, however,
Shall never flinch before the sword of mockery.

I stood - and gazed at his brave face.
What could he have thought, I wonder.
I tried hard to hide my passion in a smile-
But what a smile!

Dewy tears of joy I shed;
I blushed in the glow of morn;

I trembled in the cool breeze;
 Timid that I was,
 I did not take it as my bashfulness.
 I feared:
 What if the love of this worthless flower
 Where to irritate my Lord?

Let my love ever remain untold;
 Let him guess it, if he may.
 Love's reward is nought but love,
 Even as wisdom's, wisdom.
 Joy is nothing but love
 And grief, nothing but a break in love.
 May love remain supreme, transcending time and space!
 May my entire being burn in it, if it must!
 What care I? -
 Now that my soul has kissed its magic light.

Did the Lord read my thoughts?
 For, he, too, turned pale while leaving me.

Only with great pain
 The Lord could wrench his glance away from me.
 Words failed us.
 We stood - face to face ;
 Why, - why should the dark,
 Ugly night have intruded then !.

In gratitude was my head bowed
 It might, perhaps, have escaped his eye!
 Again, at break of Day,
 After a sleepless night,
 The Lord would come-

And look out for me here in the field.
Blown by the south wind, the breath of Death,
I might be lying - dead - on the ground.
And then, seeing my face,
He might suddenly turn pale;
And slowly wiping his eyes with a blue cloud
Well might he lament:
“Ah! had I not met that bashful flower!
Had we not loved so dearly!!”.

THE SPRING AFTER.

The sweet cuckoo,
Heralding the triumphant arrival of spring, proclaims:
"Drink deeply, delay not,
The delicious wine of thy life".

"The nectar of time flows.
Delayed, thou shalt be unable
To quench thy thirst.
This life, a tangle of laughter and tears,
Is, indeed, priceless.
But, then, is it not also flitting
Like a drop of dew placed in the burning sun?
Shall it then be wasted for naught?

The cuckoo cooed
And gay butterflies flock
Round wild flowers
Like the dust of rainbow
Thrown in the air.

The fresh rays of the rising sun, red-faced,
Intoxicated with light,
Embrace the drowsy clouds
That nestle in the sky
And wake them up with kisses
Till their cheeks turn crimson.
The full-blown bashful rose,
Though unable to speak,
Sends forth sweet-scented sighs
And yearns to stop the breeze

That passes by.
 The morning star lost in adoration
 Of the bright smiling jasmin flower,
 Stands not knowing that the day has dawned
 And his companions have long since left.

The Moon pierced by the remembrance of dead Night,
 Unable even to smile, departed:
 His face pale,
 Withered and stained with tears.
 While happiness blossoms at one end
 Sorrow appears and plucks it at the other.
 While Spring gives sweet, divine wine
 To the tender sprouts till they turn red,
 Withered dry leaves
 Ruffle on the ground in distress.

My life, alas, has become a dreary desert
 For, my darling - the festival of my eyes,
 The brightest dawn that ever dawned on earth,
 Has left me for ever.

O Spring, even if thou shalt come,
 Will hope's buds and sprouts of happiness
 Shoot up again in this wretched heart
 Laid waste by cruel fate ?
 Why shouldst thou, O Cuckoo, call her at all ?
 Thy friend has already become one with the dust!
 Why should you, beautiful flowers,
 Sigh and stand aghast ?
 What is life, but a mere foam
 Of the mighty ocean of Death
 That evolves as it rolls on!!

"This sweet flower, is in full bloom,
Stands embraced by the youthful sun.
Were it to return,
Its cup filled with fresh life,
Shalt thou recognize it then?"
One day darling asked with a smile.
Methinks that pure soul
might have taken on some new form!
Else she might have reached
The bright world of eternal spring
Where life blossoms in its fullness
Spreading the sweetness of love all around.

May this unfortunate wretched one
Whose hands once played
In her dark curly hair
Now adorn her place of eternal rest
With beautiful flowers.

"TODAY ME, TOMORROW THOU".

"Today me, tomorrow thou"
These words still echo in me.
While the shadow of the road-side tree
Quickly grew into a grim big ghost;
While dry leaves fell down
Trembling in mortal fear and fainted;
While the dying wind
Breathed heavily in spasms;
While North, South, East and West
Stood around in silent reverence
To place the corpse of Day
In the coffin of the sky
Covered with silk, bedecked with stars,
Ready to bear it;
While Eve, kissing her father's coffin
Shivered and swooned-
I stood alone on that road
Which, like life, showed neither beginning nor end.

Birds sang not, nor did leaves ruffle.
The very earth looked numb.
From a church, close by,
The bell struck a mournful note.

The white clouds, descending,
Seemed like winged angels
Coming down to kiss the Cross-
The cross that though dumb,

Sings aloud
The praise of the Great Sacrifice
Of two thousand years ago.
May thou holy Cross,
That redeemeth the world from sin,
Showing the right path to heaven,
Be glorified for ever and ever!!

Then a poor rustic's coffin passed me by.
No drum broke the stillness of the procession
But the thud of a faithful woman's heart.
No flower fell on it
But the tears of an innocent child
Stricken with grief.

A line that glittered on the coffin
Struck my eyes:
"Today me, tomorrow thou"
It sent a shudder through me.
In the twinkling of the stars
That shudder is seen even now.

MY WEDDING.

The hour of my wedding is come ?
Throb not, be calm, thou frail heart.
The time has come to deck my hair
With the jasmine wreath,
My forehead is already decorated.
Only the bridegroom should come.
The hour of union is fast approaching
Shall the law eternal be denied ?

I have heard, since how long, of that Lord of Life
At the mention of whose name,
Alas, the whole world trembles.
No life is strong enough
To resist his outstretched hand-
Every one has to bow to his wish,
Is there no limit to this lust ?
The doves of Day and Night carrying his message
Always flutter in the sky above
How I wish I could imprison them!

Many a time has he married before
And in many a home there goes on even now,
The farewell taken on leaving for the Lord's abode
Followed by the kinsmen's meaningless wailings.

The Mighty One never allows anybody,
Once conducted home,
To visit her native land again,
Alas, what a pity!, none returns to tell
Whether the harem is heaven or hell.

He is approaching
His foot-steps echo in my heart.
Ah, could I but remain one moment more
In this house where I was born !
Alas, that I should depart so soon!
But I shall not tremble nor my lips quiver;
I shall not be weak nor my face turn pale.
When the hour comes
Gladly shall I dedicate to him
This insignificant life of mine.

Ah, my sweet home that looks at me
With love and yearning
Voice fails me to bid farewell to thee.
Now I behold in full thy beauty
And now my heart breaks with the very love of thee.

Tomorrow again, at the break of day,
In thy green-carpeted garden,
Where shadows repose, warmly embracing one another
Flowers with dewy eyes, alas,
Will longingly look around,-
For there usually sat to chat with them
A frail gentle figure,-
And sadly looking at each other
They will ask:
"Was that loving form a mere shadow ?".

THE FARMER SINGS.

The Dawn has not yet opened her eyes
But her child, the Morning Star,
Is already awake.
Creeping on to the further edge;
There he sits
His face wreathed in smiles.

Decked with strings of starry pebbles and shells
The dark primitive woman of Night
Goes on her way to work
Putting the Morning Breeze
To sleep by the hill-side
And now suddenly waking up
He is heard wailing after her.

There, from beyond the eastern hill,
The day that white bull,
Now comes racing along.
The cloud of dust raised by his clattering hooves
Has flung a purple mantle
Over the tree tops of yonder forest.

Above, it is not a cloud
But a black cow
Peacefully grazing in the greens of the sky,
Herded by the gentle breeze

And, as I saunter in the fields
Fragrant with the fresh earth
Under the first rains,

I hear the young farmer sing
 As merrily he ploughs his fields
 Thrilled by the long-expected down-pour:
 "Hasten my darlings, hasten,
 We shall finish this plot
 Ere the sun is up in the sky.
 A couple of rounds more, yea couple,
 And we are done"-

"At home, I shall not wash myself
 Till you, my darlings, are washed first;
 Nor shall I drink
 Till your thirst is quenched"

"Full to the brim with fresh tender grass
 There the manger in the shed is waiting
 Impatient at your return"

"Hasten my darlings, hasten,
 May this field under your loving tread
 Fulfill my hopes
 And replenish my granary".

Plain, indeed, is the language of love
 Even to the dumb cattle:
 For their dewlaps swaying,
 Their tails a-swinging
 Merrily they jostle along
 And the earth cleaves as smooth
 As a sheet of water.

ODE TO LIFE.

O, thou, bird of life,
Confined to this cage of flesh
Art thou not pining over thy bondage !

Hemmed in by the cruel bars of fate
Thou canst not even spread out thy tender wings;
The time holds forth to thee, in mere sport,
The golden grains of happiness,
Only to entice thee;
And if at all thou dost reach to peck it
Dost thou get anything but chaff!
And how much pain, alas, hast thou endured
Being cut by its sharp blade!!

While thou dost pull on
Dreaming of the sweet heavens
If the inevitable Death kindly intervenes,
And liberates thee,
Then, shouldst thou not rejoice over it
And feel thankful to Him, indeed!

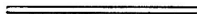
Why dost thou flutter; why shrink back?
Ah, could it be, thou dost wish
Still to linger on in this prison!!

Grazing along the hills and dales of youth,
Green by the thorny shrubs of worldly pleasures;
And often racing after the mirage of hopes;
As darkness descends on the earth,
Life, that greedy animal,

Chewing the little pleasures already enjoyed,
And licking its wounded mouth,
Lies down wearied on the highroad —
Its belly full, but still feeling hungry;
Sadly looking along the path,
Which every one should tread,
It beholds nothing but shadows and shadows!!

Why shouldst thou be frightened
At the footsteps that echo behind?
It is not the hungry wolf
But thy herdman who is approaching.

At the break of dawn thou wert released
From thy shed to graze along;
Now that the evening has drawn near
Why, — why this hesitation to return home?



THE BEETLE SINGS

What if I be a beetle
With little claim to beauty?
To the flower I am the very life.

Spreading a mild perfume around by her sighs,
Even at the burning mid-day,
Unconscious of the heat,
My darling stands,
Anxiously listening to my distant hum
That tells her of my arrival.

While I hover around
At my very breath she brightens and trembles.
When I go nearer
She pretends not having seen me
And stands still
Her sweet smile suppressed.
If ever I leave her unkissed,
On turning back I see her
Watching me with an injured look;
As I go farther away
The dumb call of that flower echoes in my heart-
And my wings fail me.
Dumb passion heavier than the spoken word
Lingers not in the air.
It goes direct and touches the heart
Stirring up vague emotions.
How could I part from that silent love

Whose cleverness has fettered me-
And with no chains!!

While the Noon stays
Beautifully embroidering her white garment with shadows
Lightly I nestle on the flower-breast,
Lest my weight shall weary her.
Blind by love I shall not embrace her harshly
For, she may be crushed-
The tender flower that she is!

Though she seldom utters a word in reply
She passionately attends to what I murmur
As I kiss her lovely breast.
If e'er I rise to leave,
Verily I return a thousand times
To bid her new farewell.
To one utterly lost in love
There is nothing called time;
Nor heat to the scorching rays of the burning sun.

But, anon, the ruthless dusk shall descend-
The dusk that doth not hesitate
To close the eyes of any flower without warning!.

Blown by the south wind
My darling, alas, shall fall down!
Her everlasting spirit shall quit this earth!!

Often doth this thought, like serpent,
Rear up its hideous hood and frighten my happiness.
Pure, simple love, alas, is without a support
In this world ruled by time.

REALISATION.

Salutation to Thee,
O, all pervading eternal Sky,
That reaches higher than the highest limits;
O, Thou, essence of Beauty, that shines
With a splendour of unfathomable purity!

Dazed at Thy immense height
The great mountain ranges stand
Gazing at Thy face!
While the tiny grass is thrilled
As it feels the touch of Thy cool cheeks.

Thou art farther than the farthest;
And yet, how wonderful,
Nearer than the nearest!!

What if I be a drop of dew,
The offspring of the darkest night?
When the fresh rays of Thy blessing
Touched my soul, by chance,
Did I not see Thee reflected
In the tiny bead of my life?—
What care I if it was but short-lived?
Then did I see the Universe
At once as a drop of dew
Glistening on the grass of Time.

My life lay in a trance of devouring joy
Which the earth, too, felt in her green thrills.
In that moment of supreme happiness,
Swept by the high tide of divine bliss
I beheld the mighty ocean of life
As one vast expanse with banks submerged.



