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From The Eye of God TRANSLATED FROM MALAYALAM BY GITA KRISHNANKUTTY

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abstract
Moymmadali Ikkakka had been like all of us once. He used to go regularly to the mosque to pray and to Alassan Mollakka's religious school, carrying the slate he used for learning the Arabic script. I had seen the slate hanging on a nail in the house. The prayer hall was next door to us. You could hear the roar of the children's voices as they sat with their legs stretched out and recited. But you could not quite make out what they chanted. 'No dot for aliph, dot below for bakku, dot above for takku,' was how they recited the alphabet in a sing-song fashion. Ikkakka liked to dig in the compound when he came back from his lessons. He loved the rainy season.
Moymmadali Ikkakka had been like all of us once. He used to go regularly to the mosque to pray and to Alassan Mollakka's religious school, carrying the slate he used for learning the Arabic script. I had seen the slate hanging on a nail in the house. The prayer hall was next door to us. You could hear the roar of the children's voices as they sat with their legs stretched out and recited. But you could not quite make out what they chanted. 'No dot for aliph, dot below for bakku, dot above for takkku,' was how they recited the alphabet in a sing-song fashion.

Ikkakka liked to dig in the compound when he came back from his lessons. He loved the rainy season.

One night, during the monsoon in May, it thundered. Next day, the yard seemed to be full of white chickens. They were clustered as thick as plants in the yard and you could hardly walk. They had not been there the day before and now the yard was crowded with them.

They were mushrooms. Mushrooms are white. There are two kinds. The poisonous ones are pretty to look at. They are like toy umbrellas that the earth holds over itself. There are little circular designs between the open petals, like the ones drawn on the toy wheels you spin in your hand.

Ummoo was happy because she could have curried mushrooms, which were delicious. She knew the difference between good mushrooms and poisonous ones. The good ones did not open out. They stood up straight like jasmine buds. The poisonous ones opened out and became flat. The two kinds were as different as open and closed white umbrellas.

There was an enormous mushroom in the bamboo thicket. Ummoo and Ikkakka found it together. It looked so beautiful, smiling among the bamboo fronds like a freshly opened jasmine flower. It seemed to coax you to pluck it. Ikkakka did not stop to think. He jumped into the bamboo thicket. When he opened his hand, it was filled with white petals. The mushroom had crumbled. His hand felt cool and smooth.

And Ikkakka was overcome by greed.

He put the mushroom in his mouth.

Ummoo watched him.

Next day, Ikkakka threw up. Mariam Ammayi was not too worried. She boiled some water with caraway seeds and gave it to him. But he
continued to throw up. And then he vomited blood. It was then that Ummoo told Mariam Ammayi that Ikkakka had eaten a mushroom.

Moothappa ran to the Panathil mosque and brought Kunharu Musaliyar. Musaliyar chanted a mantram and tied a sacred thread on Ikkakka’s arm. Ammayi vowed she would offer a mushroom made of silver to the mosque in Nagore. Ikkakka’s face looked pale and tired when he stopped throwing up. His lips hung slack and no one could follow him when he spoke. His speech was slurred and the words meaningless.

Moymmadali Ikkakka’s lips twisted. He frothed at the mouth. Raman Vaidyar of Anjappura gave him a prescription, but it did not do him any good. Ikkakka tore his clothes. He hooted like a crow-pheasant, jakkaram, jakkaram.

Moothappa brought a Panikker, an astrologer, from somewhere south of the village to perform a pooja and find out what was wrong. The Panikker sat cross-legged and prayed. Then he set out cowries and made calculations, adding and subtracting figures.

He discovered that the spirits had coveted the mushroom that Moymmadali Ikkakka had eaten. The spirits had tried to snatch it from Ikkakka, but he had already eaten it. There were three spirits. They got into Ikkakka’s throat. When they came down to his stomach, Ikkakka began to throw up. The medicines and mantrams made the spirits restless. So they climbed into his head.

Ummoo had heard Moothappa ask the Panikker, ‘Can’t you drive the spirits out of him?’ When Ummoo told me this, I said, ‘Moothappa is such a big man. Surely he can chase the spirits away?’

Ummoo began to laugh. Her dimples grew deeper when she laughed and her eyes narrowed. Why did Ummoo tease me all the time?

‘You’re a stupid boy.’
‘I’m not.’
‘Will you tell Umma if I tell you?’
‘No.’
‘Promise?’
‘Promise.’

If you wanted Ummoo to tell you something, you always had to make a promise. She told me that the Panikker had performed a homam to drive the spirits away. He drew a sacred design on the floor of the outhouse, sprinkled rice flour and turmeric over it and made a pit for the sacred fire. Chethi flowers were brought for him. He had a bath, prayed and chanted mantrams. Moymmadali Ikkakka sat obediently in front of him, cross-legged. He began to tremble violently. The sound of mantrams echoed through the air. Panikker threw the chethi flowers he had used for the pooja into the fire. Ikkakka began to tear at his clothes.

‘The spirits are restless. They want a refuge.’
‘Will he be cured?’ asked Moothappa.
'Yes.'

Mariam Ammayi's eyes lit up with a smile. 'He must get well, even if we have to sell the compound on the southern side to pay for it.'

'Yes,' said Moothappa, 'he must get well.'

When the Panikker arrived next morning, the whole household was happy. Milk and bananas had been brought for him from Karuppan's house.

But Panikker's face was ashen pale. He took out his bag and stood waiting, umbrella and stick in hand, his eyes on the ground. He said softly, 'I can't do it.'

'What do you mean, Panikker?'

'He'll never be cured. If I cure him, I will die.'

Moothappa was aghast. So was Mariam Ammayi. Ummoo cried.

Panikker had not slept all night. Whenever his eyes began to close, three tuskers in rut had appeared before him. They had long tusks, with ends like scimitars. They had lurched at him, their tusks aimed at his body. Panikker had joined his palms in an entreating gesture.

'Please, I did not do anything.'

'Don't stand here any longer.'

'All right.'

The spirits had created the tuskers through their magical powers.

Mariam Ammayi asked, 'Can't you use your powers against them, Panikker?'

'No, child. They're very strong.'

'What will we do now?'

Panikker turned up his palms in despair. Everyone began to wail.

Moothappa looked numbly at Panikker.

Panikker said, 'The spirits will inhabit his body for fourteen years.'

'Who said so?'

'The voices of the spirits.'

'Will they go away after fourteen years?'

'I don't know child. They may go away, or ...'

'Or?'

'The child will die.'

Panikker walked away slowly. Moothappa did not have the energy to follow him. He sat on the embankment and watched till Panikker climbed the stile at the end of the field and was lost to view.

As Ummoo told me this, we heard Ammayi's voice,

'Ummoo, it's afternoon. Where has the girl disappeared?'

* * *

Thousands of black knots lie tangled inside my head. Blood froths in me. My nerves grow taut. I will break now, into pieces. Umma is not aware of all this.

The smile that is Umma waits for me. Umma is like the tendril of a jasmine plant. Her teeth are jasmine flowers. Umma is in a fix, and she is
calling out to me to help. She has no one else to help her. Only I, her eldest son. Umma and I are one.

I knew why Umma was asking me to go to her quickly. Only Thami had been driven away. There were nine more creatures in the outhouse. They were not human. If we did not kill them, they would kill Umma. I could not exist without Umma. Nor could Umma exist without me. Umma, I’m nearly there. God, look after my Umma. God, rabbe, give my hands strength. Give my legs strength.

If I stand here like an idiot, doing nothing, they’ll catch hold of Umma. That’s their way. They’re coming closer now.

They’re roaring and coming in from all four sides. Umma is caught in their net. Their tusks are full of revenge. Their horns are hatchets. Eighteen swords, quivering with fury, surround Umma.

Mone, little one ...

I’ll not allow them to touch Umma. Amazingly, I remembered what Kunharu Musaliyar had taught me to recite. At night school. Do you know where Heaven is? It is somewhere in the sky. I pointed to the sky. No, you fool, no ... Heaven is under Umma’s feet. Kiss the ground beneath her feet. Umma is the earth.

Umma’s call became the sound of weeping.

Something exploded inside my head.

I leaped. I grabbed the sword and shield from the wall. I kicked open the stable door. The green horse, the war horse, stood with its head raised. I jumped on it. I aimed a kick at its stomach. I growled. The horse raised its front legs. I was high up in the air, and the sword was above my head. I shouted a war cry. Forward, to the battlefield ...

I leaned forward. I bent over. The reins tightened in my hand. I hit them with the shield. I flashed my sword. I balanced the horse on its hind legs. Kick them, horse.

I brandished my sword. I slashed out, forcefully. The sword flew through his neck like lightning. He was cut into two. My enemy’s head rolled down. The horns and tusks flew apart.

It was not yet time to rejoice. Only one enemy was dead. There were eight more. And they were unconcerned. They lunged at me with their horns. I needed to look after not only myself but my beloved Umma as well. I turned my horse round and dived down. Umma hung onto my right hand. I lifted her as if she was a flower. I placed her behind me on the horse. Sit there. Put your arms around me. Watch this last fight with your eyes wide open.

My eyes and nose fixed on the target, I turned right and left. I slashed, I cut, I moved forward, forward ...

Only then did I recognize all my enemies. I had been betrayed. They were not the only enemies. Mariam Ammayi and Nafeesu Thatha were with them as well. Waiting for their chance, they walked forwards and
back, dodged and disappeared.

Dhum, I heard a sound and turned around. Umma was slipping off the horse. She wept.

I saw a noose come flying through the air. It looked like a huge ring in the wind. I blocked it with my shield and moved my neck away. The noose fell on the horse’s neck. Ammayi caught the rope and pulled hard. The reins slipped from my hands. The horse neighed and galloped away. I fell down and rolled over the ground.

Ammayi and Thatha caught my horse and tied it up. They knocked the sword from my hand. And my shield. Two pairs of hands pulled the rope tight around me. Where was my sword? And my horse?

Treacherous enemies, let me go. If you don’t let me go, I’ll not think of you as my Ammayi and my Thatha. I’ll kill you. Ahmed will kill both of you.

Ammayi heard me. She was afraid. Her grip on me loosened, she let go. But Thatha would not let me go. She held me tight. I could not move. Thatha’s hands were so strong. Like steel wires. If only I could move ...

Ammayi wept bitterly. She searched for something on the ground. She bent down. Perhaps she was looking for my sword. When she straightened up, a chain dangled from her hand. An iron chain. The chain Moymmadali Ikkakka had been tied up with.

Ammayi would not listen to anything I said. I got up from the ground and looked at Umma’s face. Umma looked numb.

Umma, let’s go away from here. Let’s not stay here any more.

I heard sounds in the east and west. Sounds came roaring from all directions. Roaring and sobbing. The sobbing called to me. It came rolling towards me. It entered the outhouse. The sobbing was Umma.

Umma is beautiful. Umma is a white plant swaying in the breeze. A tear-plant. All its leaves are tears. The drop-shaped leaves tremble in the wind. They wave at me, they call me – mone, mone, little one ...

I’m coming. Let me take off this chain they’ve tied on my feet. Umma, I want to lie pressed to your breast. I want sleep on your breast. I want to sleep soundly.