

**THE GOOD,
THE BAD AND
THE UGLY**

Three Banned Plays

ELANGOVAN



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AND THE UGLY

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by

ELANGOVAN

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For the Oppressed

known and unknown

yesterday

today

tomorrow

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INTRODUCTION

by Elangovan

MY ART CONTRIBUTES towards establishing a sort of alternative 'thematic universe' in Singapore, considered to be an over consuming and over managed society in Southeast Asia.

My concern is to be a voice for the voiceless, even in silence.

My works invoke a puritanical fury; explore the moral, social, religious, ethnic and political questions that shape the future of this society and deal creatively with the dehumanising realities of the underdogs of the society whose prescribed behaviour and experiences have more depth and complexity than those who are economically and politically comfortable as the status quo.

My writings internalise and exemplify the 'between-ness' among the three races – the majority Chinese and the minorities – Malay, Indian and others. The socio-religious and cultural collisions and tensions, political amalgams are also explored and exposed.

My tone is always irreverent, and the creative approach is towards excavating memories and revisiting people on the margins of the society. The subaltern, the hybrids, the renegades and disempowered attract me more than the palanquin-carrying pseudo-moralist and prudish elites. The most striking feature in my works is the representation of historically and culturally identifiable experiences shared by the multi-ethnic

communities in Singapore. Overall, I have the moral courage to tell the objective truth and expose the oppression and tyranny – physical and mental to redeem humanity as an artiste.

My works can neither be predicted nor boxed into some slogan, orthodox party line political frame, or fixed dogma. I combine the private and the public to allegorise the individual experience.

My plays could be understood as carrying a radical and contestatory content and often combative but convincing rhetoric that shatters any attempt to perpetuate the culture of silence here or anywhere.

My plays are intimate, edgy, and unapologetic. Unlike many other artistes in this country, I find it very difficult to seek comfort in becoming a roll of artistic toilet-paper for the powers that be.

I have been walking far too long in minefields. I enjoy this dangerous journey though I have lost much in material benefits. I am growing spiritually strong day by day. Not in a religious sense. I have no religion except my art – poetry and theatre.

9 July 2014



PREFACE

by Cyril Wong

ELANGOVAN DOES NOT mince words, at least not on the theatre stage. What he would really like to demolish is that omnipresent shell of social oppression, officially imposed or ideologically conditioned, that keeps the truth hidden from view. If you were to cast a wide glance at his body of work, you'll find a shocking contrast between his initial years of dancing with language as a Tamil poet to the incendiary Singaporean playwright who has since been banned more than once by the authorities. Perhaps the poet-cum-playwright was biding his time; perhaps something simply snapped within him from existing in this country for so long. His theatre company, Agni Kootthu (Theatre of Fire), has been called many times into the offices of the Media Development Authority to be chastised or formally banned (often at the very last minute or before the show was about to open) and a police arrest was even made at the entrance of one performance venue. No other theatre company in Singapore can boast such an impressive résumé for being consistently victimised in this way.

I remember when I was juggling being a poet with being a performing arts programmer at The Substation (Singapore), where several of the company's less controversial plays were staged, I would be taken aback by the minimalism of Agni Kootthu's operations: publicity posters looked like they had been haphazardly designed without the languorous

help of Photoshop, while the staging of the shows and their low-cost costuming bleakly reminded me of a secondary school production. But such initial impressions would be swiftly kicked aside when the actors took their places and started projecting long-distance verbal grenades in the audience's direction. In a theatre scene that has transitioned from the conscious multiculturalism championed by The Substation's founder, Kuo Pao Kun, a style of performance later diluted by Theatreworks and Toy Factory to become over-aestheticised, pandering affairs, to the pared-down, experimental yet thought-provoking showcases of The Necessary Stage, Teater Ekamatra and the more dialogical and interactive Dramabox, to the increasingly glossy and entertaining productions of Wild Rice and the daringly physical but flashy Cake Theatrical Productions, Agni Kootthu stands wilfully apart on its own ever-uncertain feet. Agni Kootthu harbours no aspirations to impress or engage in artistic experiments; there is nothing even superficially entertaining about its productions. What audiences *will* get are explosions of hostile dialogue with unembarrassed commentaries about what is wrong with the very society we are in.

Race, sex, politics and religion – there is nowhere that Elangovan or Agni Kootthu will not go in debunking central myths that others would like to preserve. Abusive to downright scatological, the monologues or rapid-fire speeches that Elangovan's characters spew forth are something to behold – and his words are best experienced in real life or on stage as opposed to being read solely on paper. Here we have compiled Elangovan's three banned plays, an imperfect supplement to

what would have been a series of aural beatings if experienced open-heartedly inside a performance setting. The first play here, *Talaq* (translated as 'divorce'), is a monologue exploring the plight of abused Indian-Muslim women, and focuses on the hypocrisy that arises when core Muslim principles are interpreted to favour one gender over the other. The central protagonist is a mess of self-delusions who slowly comes apart when faced with her husband's infidelity. But the actor also takes on the voice of the husband in a moment that is both schizophrenic and revealing: "You cannot do anything without any evidence. If I want to I can frame you that you are having an illicit affair with someone. If I want to I can push you down from this flat and claim that you have committed suicide. Or I can see a powerful *bomoh* (Malay Shaman) and charm you to become a sick woman. I can also charm you and make you go mad..." In a world gone insane, patriarchy is the unscalable wall that the victimised woman in the monologue rams and rails against, and predictably to no avail.

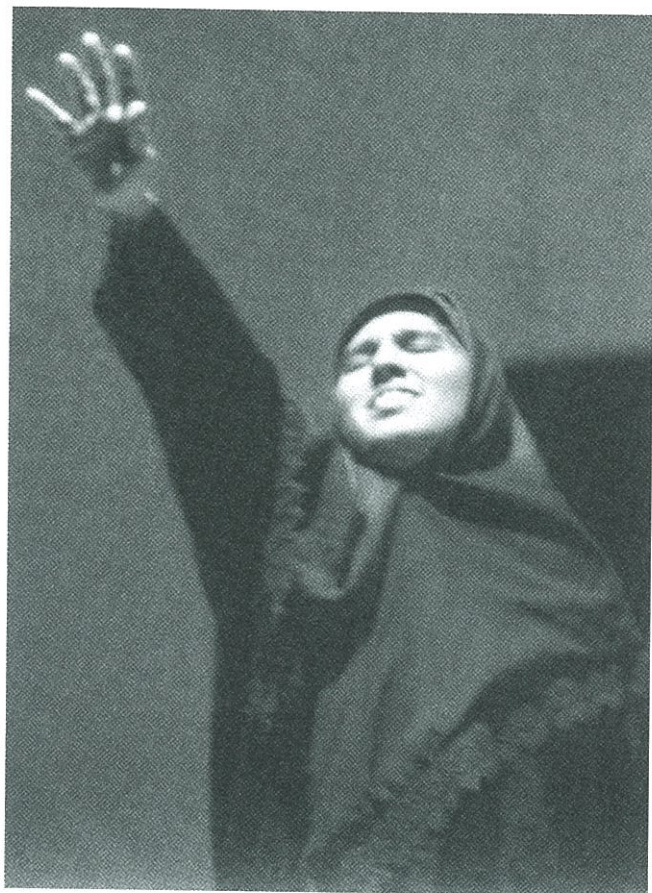
From patriarchy imposed via race and religion upon a hapless female, the men take centrestage next with their own deranged illusions about their sense of self and identity. *Smegma* (the cheeselike secretion found under the foreskin or along the clitoris) is made up of several shorter plays, featuring men who patronise underaged prostitutes; there is also one who encounters a pregnant suicide bomber and another who antagonises a foreign maid. Conservative mindsets about sex and delicately defined race-relations are imploded beyond recovery, as in a scene when a Malay man answers another non-Malay for

condemning him: "Think just because I Malay, I condemned is it? You are too much. You are making fun of my race. Why your wife so noisy? You never fuck her properly is it? Because your one is useless yellow cigarette right? Ask her to try my brown cigar lah! Some more *potong* one. Very clean."

Then in *Stoma* (a word that can refer to an opening made in the abdominal wall), a Catholic priest who has been defrocked over sex-abuse allegations, is visited by a woman from an Internet sex-chat encounter. Her arrival ignites an examination of his conscience and previous transgressions are exposed. At the start of 2013, *Stoma* was the third play by Agni Kootthu to have been banned after the English and Malay versions of *Talaq* in 2000 and *Smegma* in 2006. One can see why authorities reacted in this way, considering how the language of *Stoma* switches breathlessly between the sacred and the profane; with even the sacred coming across as a form of demonic hysteria. Early in the play, for example, the priest attempts to exorcise the private feelings elicited by the female character by praying madly: "Spirit of our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Most Holy Trinity, Immaculate Virgin Mary, angels, archangels and saints of Heaven, descend upon me. Please purify me, Lord, mould me, fill me with Yourself, use me[...] Banish from me all spells, witchcraft, black magic, malefice, ties, maledictions and the evil eye; diabolic infestations, oppressions, possessions; all that is evil and sinful, jealousy, perfidy, envy.... Burn all these evils in hell, that they may never again touch me or any other creature in the entire world." The play consistently demonstrates that in terms of the equal potential for emotional and psychological

violence, the sacred and the profane become indistinguishable sides of the same coin.

Elangovan's plays straddle and expand that knife's edge between Ionescan absurdism and social realism into a unique and hellish realm of verbal brimstone and nightmarish imagery. To encounter Elangovan is to realise that one is already trapped in a cocoon of self-deception regarding the orderliness of our social universe: there is no justice and everything is unfair; a will-to-power is the law and morality is but a figment of an idealistic imagination informed by a stubborn conscience. Yet it is also from such an aforesaid imagination that these plays have been able to be born.



TALAQ

(First self-published in 1999)

Talaq came under the media spotlight in 2000, when the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) in Singapore denied it a performance license for its English and Malay performances on grounds that they would offend religious sensibilities. The play had originally been staged in Tamil, once in 1988 and twice in 1999. Concerns were raised over the portrayal of the Islamic faith and Indian Muslim community group South Indian Jamiathul Ulama (SIJU) protested the staging of TALAQ. Subsequently, Elangovan and the *Talaq* lead actress, Nargis Banu, reported death threats being made against them, and the Agni Kootthu president S. Thenmoli was arrested and warned for criminal trespass before having a private rehearsal to document the play within the officially-booked-and-paid-for Drama Centre.

I

[Lights fade-in to show a woman in Purdah lying on her right side on a pure white stage. Next to her is a bouquet of roses, a large get-well-soon card and a jug of water with a glass. She gets up in pain. She reads the card.]

One day a woman asked the prophet - *Sallaahu alahi vasalam* - what were her duties towards her husband. To her he replied: "A wife should not leave her home without her husband's permission. Women are the twin halves of men. The world and all things in it are valuable and one of the most valuable in the world is a virtuous woman. God enjoins you to treat women well, for they are your mothers, daughters, aunts. The rights of women are sacred. See that women are maintained in the rights assigned to them. When a woman performs the five daily prayers and fasts in the month of Ramadan and is chaste, and is not disobedient to her husband, then tell her that she can enter paradise by whichever door she chooses."

"They (wives) are your garments and you are their garments." (*Qur'an* 2:187)

"Of all things Allah has made lawful, what he hates most is divorce." (Hadith from Abu Dawud)

30

"When a woman who has been called to her husband's bed refuses and he spends the night
5 angry, the angels curse her until the morning."
(Hadith from Bukhari and Muslim)

"If a woman asks her husband for divorce without some strong reason, the scent of paradise will
10 be forbidden to her." (Hadith from Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah)

"Paradise is reward of a wife who pleases her husband until death." (Hadith from Ibn Majah)

15 Dear Nisha,

These words are for you. I hope you will read them and get spiritual strength. Please forgive
20 me for putting you in this difficult situation.
The roses are for your quick recovery.

With love,

Sam

25 Yaah Allah!

[*She sings a nursery rhyme.*]

Aaararo adi aaraaro
my love aaraaro aarinaaro...

5 Sweetest honey – my
nectar that doesn't cloy

Close your eyes
10 sweet sugarcane
of my mind

You came my dear
to rule all earthly treasures
15 bringing glory to us
with no envying eyes...

[*Sobs.*]

20 Nisha! Did your husband call?

No doctor, I'm still waiting for his call.

If he doesn't turn up, please let me know. Don't worry. It is
25 over. Everything will be fine. Relax okay.

Thank you, doctor.

[*Pause. She gets up.*]

What was to have been born as a beautiful girl in five months came out to look at the world three days ago. Partial birth abortion. They watched its movement on the ultrasound screen. The doctor pulled out a tiny body and hands. Its tiny fingers were clasped in prayer. It was pleading. *Please save me. Please do not kill me.* I felt its desperate kicks in my womb. I could still feel the kicks though I was unconscious. The doctor took a pair of scissors and pushed the tip into the back of its head. It reacted by stretching both hands in shock. *Amma!* It was like the automatic impulse of little children trying to grab at something before they fall.

15

The doctor spread open the scissors, tearing open a hole behind the skull. He then forced a high-powered suction tube into the hole. He switched on the motor and sucked out all the brain. The child was motionless. He pulled it out slowly and threw it into the disposal bin. There was a smile frozen on its face.

20

Is that right Nisha? Is that right Nisha? Is that right Nisha? Is that...

25

Nisha... Nisha... Come on tell me Nisha...

[She falls. Stares at an imaginary foetus on the floor.]

30 Nisha, I will tell you lovey. I will tell you.

Vaappa! Vaappa! [*She is excited.*] My *Vaappa* is here. My *Vaappa* is here. *Vaappa!*

5

Yes lovey, I will tell you. Listen carefully.

[She narrates the tale in a childlike manner.]

There was a beautiful salt doll. It did not know what it was. So it journeyed for thousands of miles over land, until it finally came to the sea. It was fascinated by this strange moving mass, quite unlike anything it had ever seen before. It kept watching the huge waves.

10

15

Hey who are you? said the salt doll to the sea.

The sea smilingly replied, *come in and see. You will find out.* So the doll waded into the sea bravely. The farther it walked into the sea the more it dissolved, until there was only the mouth of it left. Before that last bit dissolved, the salt doll smiled peacefully and exclaimed in wonder, *Now I know what I am.* It disappeared without a name among the waves as a wave.

20

25

Nisha, you are like that salt doll. The bridegroom who has come from Singapore to marry you is the sea. Henceforth, he is everything to you. Nisha, always learn to accept only the good in others. You didn't ask his name? Deen. He is a graduate. Earns a high salary. Big family. They don't want a Singapore girl. They prefer a bride from here.

30

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

