

Chalam's writing spanned 1920-1972, the most significant years of social change in India's history, the years that spanned the independence movement and subsequent formative struggles. His writings reflect the idealism of that age, and the defiance of authority and existing social norms. Chalam was one of the first Telugu writers to reject the decorous, Victorian writing style of his times. His prose on occasion throbbed with raw, physical passions that shocked polite society. He was also one of the most ferocious advocates of women's emancipation.

The Madiga Girl

Chalam

It was December vacation when, without telling anyone, I headed for my wife's village to see how she was doing, after I'd impregnated her for the sixth time in the eight years of our marriage. The village makes one wonder whether we are still in this world, to question our existence, whether we're alive, or merely deflecting death to unchain ourselves from the mountains of office files, like the house fly wriggling free of phlegm it'd fallen into. The fragrance of dew-drenched hay, the greenness of the crop, the freshness of grass underfoot, and the music of the carefree birds hold us in thrall, like the memories of our ancestors who have left us behind.

I spent a sleepless night, regretting the thirty-five years I had wasted, cooped in wobbly office chairs or lounging on the sagging string cot in my wife's village. A village that seems to have an unfair share of glossy skinned belles bursting with verve. Those girls, the village belles, whose sinewy muscles undulate under their ebony skin. When I see them, unaware and unable to contain their voluptuous charms in their flimsy sarees, I'm tempted to prostrate before them in obeisance, ignoring the risk of being flattened by an oncoming lorry, or the call of pending files, or the shriveled visage of my supervisor.

Just as a cool, smooth marble surface, or the mane of a freshly massaged thoroughbred, or the heckles of swan-like doves beg to be caressed, I have an irresistible longing to stroke the nubile bodies of the village damsels. No matter that they're not beautiful, not decked in gold, or draped in snow-white Uppada or gossamer Banaras sarees, or that their hair is undone, or that they have rustic forms, or that they lack the delicate complexion of their sophisticated counterparts. Wouldn't you give your life, to devour those blinding curves? And to gawk at the gait that animates their hourglass waists and the pure sheen of their bodies?

Another virtue. They don't flee at the sight of a stranger, or peep from behind doors, or shy away mumbling inaudible invectives when you greet them. They laugh all the time, their pearly teeth gleaming pure white, like the perfectly set seeds in a tender, pomegranate. They are not laughing at you. I think it is the sheer joy of living that courses through their body, the thrill, of enjoying god-given light and air. It is difficult to say whether the caprice in their eyes is the glint of the setting sun or the burden of the grace of their bosom.

My very first evening in my wife's village revived the sharp passion that had been killed by kitchen smells, the wailing of my kids, remonstrations of my supervisor, and visitors baiting me with bribes. It is not the mundane desire that familiarity arouses in you, like a home cooked meal. Nor is it the hurried passion and stealthy exit after a promiscuous fling that make you vow never to see the face of the wayward bitch again. It is the call of the cowherd beckoning the straggling herd home, the tingling when her hair, stirred by cool breeze and unable to settle comfortably, tickles the back of her neck, when I want my love to sit by my side, smile and press her young bosom against me and look into my eyes.

Such a desire is natural in any living, breathing human being. I could never conquer it despite my best effort. I am timid, in my village such thoughts would never cross my mind. Toiling, eating, going to bed, making love and loafing about with fellow clerks are enough to make me happy. But the breeze here, in my wife's village, is so intoxicating, I can't suppress unsettling

thoughts. God, my creator, couldn't have crushed them. Not even those worthies who invented morality to deny men and women their due.

You've seen Kona Seema? Haven't you? The road runs sandwiched between the canal and plantations. The sun fills the canal waters with dappled images of swaying orchards. It was on this road that one day my heart stopped at the sound of a giggle that had the melody of gurgling water. I stood in the middle of the road, enchanted by words dropping like petals, punctuated by laughter. A song rent the air. Does she, the source of this music, have a care in this world, I wondered. That laughter merged magically with the morning light, the limpid water and the birds' love songs. Did this laughter stir into motion, the flowers, the air, and the coconut fronds?

Fifteen minutes later, she appeared before me like a nymph, emerging from inside the orchards, singing and talking to an old *saibu*. In her early twenties, she wore a red *saree*. She approached the canal, pitched up her petticoat and stepped into the water to wade through. My searing scrutiny left her unconcerned. I'd never seen such a resplendent complexion. She wore no blouse. She used her *pallu* to cover her bosom. One look at her velvety body conjured up a deep nocturnal new moon sky, lit by the stars. All those poetic descriptions from the epics failed to match the radiance of her body. A speck of dust had no choice but to slide off her marble-smooth skin. The sun played hide and seek on her shoulders. The mere thought of the curves of her shoulders, oh my lord, inflamed the body with desire. The dark thighs radiated a blinding light under the hoisted hem of the petticoat.

My wife, with her distended abdomen, reedy arms and the neck of a stork, greeted me when I returned home from that visit to paradise.

'Where have you been, so early?'

I ignored the question and fled inside, afraid to meet her eyes. By all accounts my wife is a beautiful woman. She has all the attributes of beauty required by the ancient scriptures. She has an hourglass middle when she is not pregnant. She is fidelity personified. I think she would spit at the nymph, if she were to see her. But my infatuation with the damsel was such that I'd have readily strangled my wife that night. If I had to choose between the damsel and the office of a governor, I'd be the first to sign a document relinquishing the office.

Restless, I ventured out again that afternoon. But the rain got in the way. The evening in its wake was magnificent! The trees and birds were busy flicking off raindrops. The breeze was dizzy with joy. The desire to see her had become acute, like a school kid wanting to skip classes. What would I need in life, once I win her friendship? How about caressing her hand, her curves! My thoughts were truly in the gutter by now. In my mind, I could see the water flow under the fickle shades of the coconut palms, the grass flanking the cool moving waters, and a strong wind fluttering her *pallu*. The furtive glances of her love-filled eyes intoxicate me. If this dream comes true, does it matter if I slave as a clerk for the rest of my life, or face an abusive supervisor? I would ask everyone, 'Miserable fellows, what do *you* know about *rasah* and happiness?'

I arrived at the orchard and settled down for a long wait. No trace of life. Half an hour later, I saw my swaying beauty returning from some unknown rendezvous. It doesn't take long to start a conversation with the simple girl. We start trading pleasantries.

'It's slushy here. Let's find a better spot,' she said, and guided me to the veranda of a factory next to the orchard. We stood there chatting. I am happy just standing close to her, close enough to her to read the thoughts animating her face. Isn't it enough if her eyes meet my gaze, enough to look at her as she stealthily watches the road for fear of detection, pulling back the inconstant *pallu* onto her shoulder?

'What will the passersby think of us? They are foul-mouthed. Come stand here,' she said and pulled me aside.

'I first mistook you for the mail *saibu*. He often passes this way like Brahma,' she cackled. That laughter erased the jealous thoughts about the *saibu*, and disarmed me. What was I to do? Could I be content with appropriating that laughter, kissing those smiling lips, touching

her tremulous neck and embracing her swaying bosom? Why is this silly *saibu* spoiling the fun? Should I slaughter him, burn him or simply trample him?

'Why are you chatting with me for so long, don't you have important matters to take care of?' she asked me.

'Because I have a crush on you.'

'What a joke! We're poor folk. No nice clothes or ornaments. Only darkness and crudeness,' she said and stretched her arms forward. A raging desire to grab her hands and taunt her to free herself flashed in me, but I held back afraid of spooking her. In those ten minutes, I longed several times to touch her but fear stood in my way.

An inner voice told me to act fast before someone showed up and time ran out. But courage failed me. A passerby might notice?

To prolong the conversation, I asked her if the orchard belonged to her family.

'Oh, you want to see the orchard? Come,' she said and led the way.

I trailed her, watching her swaying behind. Ah, the curves. I realized what I'd missed and rued my barren life.

'Watch for carpenter ants, come this side,' she said and pulled me aside. I was not sure, was it intentional?

We stood behind the dense hibiscus growth. She plucked two flowers and pressed them into her snaky braid. That tug lifted her bosom and chased my fears and reticence away. I clasped her hands. The firm flesh of her arms resisted my touch. Such delight! Such warmth and smoothness! How different from the married ones who give in too readily, and then act coy. Depressing, my god!

What a contrast those five minutes were! How can I explain my delightful plight? The more she tried to free herself the more tightly I held her. But my hands are slipping. My strength is ebbing. The natural scent of her body is making me faint. The scents arrayed in the *attar saibu's* shop are no match! Neither is the fragrant *davanam* (Artemisia) that permeates passenger trains where it is sold. Her company exudes a feral scent, a commingling of the scent of the scorched earth after rain and of the fragrance of the musk deer. I will gladly spurn divinity and immortality in exchange for these few moments.

She pushed me away and in mock anger said, 'Please, don't touch me'. Then she ran off to the riverbank, laughing. Was she amused by my shock and disappointment?

I followed her, admiring her loping gait of a heifer. Letting me move close, she leaned towards me.

'I'm not that type,' she said, and laughed in an odd way.

My head began to reel, I had difficulty keeping my eyes open.

Her eyes, her entire body are mocking me now.

'The sun barely sets before couples sneak into those rooms.' She laughs again. 'They have no shame, nothing,' she said.

I was intrigued. Who is this woman? Is this a charade or true innocence?

'Men like you think I'm of that type. We're respectable folk. Now, hands off. No more mischief. Who do you think I am?'

What does she see in my eyes, despair or resignation? As I stare stupidly, she came close to me. She nudged my shoulder with her bosom and passed her hand across my pocket.

'There's no rice for the night. If you can give me . . .'

I couldn't look her in the eye. I averted my face. That one word shattered the dream. My heart bled at the loss of the beauty and romance I'd conjured up. I couldn't believe that she was of the same ilk as the jewelry-crazed, mansion-inhabiting city vampires. But I was not ready to shun her. Perhaps she really needed money for the night meal. Before I could answer, an old woman spotted us.

She asked the girl, 'Who is this guy, what're you doing here?'

Oh my God, would she complain that I was trying to molest her? Or, is she just toying with me? I regretted having met her. I began imagining terrible things – public humiliation, my in-laws finding out, their son-in-law messing with a Madiga girl.

'Nothing, he wanted to see the garden,' the girl said.

'What business have you with these men? Go home, girl! Ha, wanted to see the garden!' the old woman scoffed.

The girl hesitated.

'Why aren't you leaving? Do you want me to tell your father to thrash you?'

'Don't be angry. This man is a gentleman, don't you see? You're unnecessarily angry.'

'Hmm, everyone is a gentleman. There is no rice for the night. Go get some. Will chatting with gentlemen fill your stomach?' the old woman said and left.

'My mother,' the girl said.

'Do you really have no food? Whose orchard is this, then?'

'We leased it. But it is always losing money, this year is no different.'

I pulled out a five-rupee note.

'Come inside,' she said.

'No, I have to go.'

'Not now? When?'

'I won't come again.'

'Why?'

'I have nothing to do here.'

'Then why did you come today?'

I got angry.

'I never thought you were this type.'

'What type do you think I am?'

'You will do anything for money.'

She bit her lip and looked at me with tear-filled eyes.

'Why did you pay me then?' Her voice shook.

'Because you need something to eat.'

She stood silently as two tears fell on her *pallu*. A *koel* sang relentlessly. A sly breeze made its way. The dying rays of the sun dappled her hands. Stray curls of hair fell on the flowers in her braid. Her beauty beckoned me again. Spontaneously, my lips brushed her eyes. I was happy to be with her but the money still irked me. I made a move to leave.

'You may go but listen to me for a moment,' she pleaded.

'I am listening,' I said rooted to the spot.

'Are you scared to go in to the room with me?' she challenged.

'Okay, let's go in,' I said.

She steered me into the room and bolted the door. In one corner of the room there was a cot covered with a cotton mat, a soiled pillow and many *beedi* stubs on the floor.

'What?' I asked her.

She let her *pallu* drop down deftly, and, placed my hand her bare bosom. Would I have pulled my hand back were it not for the smelly room, the dirty bed and the *beedi* stubs? Would I not feast on those delicacies? Will I not greedily take in that neck, that bellybutton? They gave me all the bliss I needed in this birth.

'No,' I said retrieving my hand with some effort.

'Why did you touch me awhile ago when we were in the garden?' she said combatively, adding, 'I am not as low as you think.'

Her eyes filled again, her lip trembled and drew back. I did not know what to do.

She stretched her hand and pressed the five-rupee note into my palm and closed it.

'Where will you find food for the night?' I asked her.

The look she gave me could have reduced a mortal to ashes.

'Are you angry with me?'

'What does it matter, the anger of lowly people like us does not count.'

'Look, you're angry.'

'Not at all. You may go now.'

'Please accept this,' I said stretching out the note.

'Not if it is charity.'

'Is it worse than the way you make money?'

Silence.

'I'm your friend. This is a gift, I can't see you go hungry. Please accept.'

I touched her cheek with affection and gazed at her. She covered her eyes with her palms and cried. I knew this would happen. I wiped the tears and kissed her eyes and sat by her side.

'Why do you cry?' I asked.

She did not respond, but I knew she wanted to tell me something. I waited.
'You think I would ask you for money for myself? But it has become my job, my living, whether I like it or not. We have always lived beyond our means. I guess my mother used to raise extra money in this manner. One day, she gifted me to Venkayya, a man of our caste. We owed him a few hundred rupees. He tried to get me when I was asleep. I shouted for help but mother had already left along with my father.

'I ran all over the orchard and hid behind a jujube bush, gasping. It was a full moon night. He easily found me and threw me down. I fought him till my strength failed. I collapsed. I closed my eyes and awaited the worst. But I don't know what came over him. He bashed my head against the ground, spat and left cursing my parents. I lay there corpse-like when my mother came and began beating me complaining that I hadn't obliged him. I told her I wasn't going to allow him to take me. That angered her more and another round of thrashing followed.
'Who will repay the debts, your husband?' She yelled.

'What happened then?' I asked her.
'Oh, what a night that was. He returned the next night. I'll kill you if you touch me, I told him. My mother threw me out again. There was no one to help me. My husband had migrated to Rangoon.'

'You must have been in quite a spot' I said.

'Indeed I was. There was hardly a man who didn't ogle me whenever I stepped out. I was too innocent and didn't understand the meaning of those looks. Over time, I began to fear my beauty. I realized why Muslim women wore the *burqa*. The lecherous looks of these men bothered me more than their touch or illicit caress. I wanted to spit in their face.'

'Was that the end of the story?' I asked her.

'Not at all. One day, the owner of the factory asked me to report for the night shift. I refused. You won't get any wages, then, he said.
How do we pay repay our mounting debt? So, I reported for the night shift.
There was no one else in the factory. He grabbed my hand. I told him that I was not that kind. I told him I'm a Madiga and you're a Brahmin. It doesn't benefit you. I managed to slip out and ran to his house, a few feet from the factory, and fell on the feet of his mother and wife.'

'Don't touch us, you Madiga,' they shouted.

'What about your son who is stalking a Madiga,' I asked them.

'They hurled a *katti peeta* (a sickle mounted on a wooden plank) at me. The owner came and tried to molest me regardless of the presence of his wife and mother. I picked up the *katti peeta* and threw it at his face and fled.

Soon the police caught me and put me in the lock-up. A constable came by and said he could get me out if I agree to sleep with him. I didn't. He slugged me till I became unconscious. Then he had me. The others followed.'

'That was the turning point. After I'd lost my chastity, there was no point in virtue, I thought. I agreed to be Venkayya's concubine. He gave me good clothes, jewelry, good food. When he died, I was back on the streets again. This is the only way I can save my family from starving. Tell me, is there any other way?'

I had no answer.