

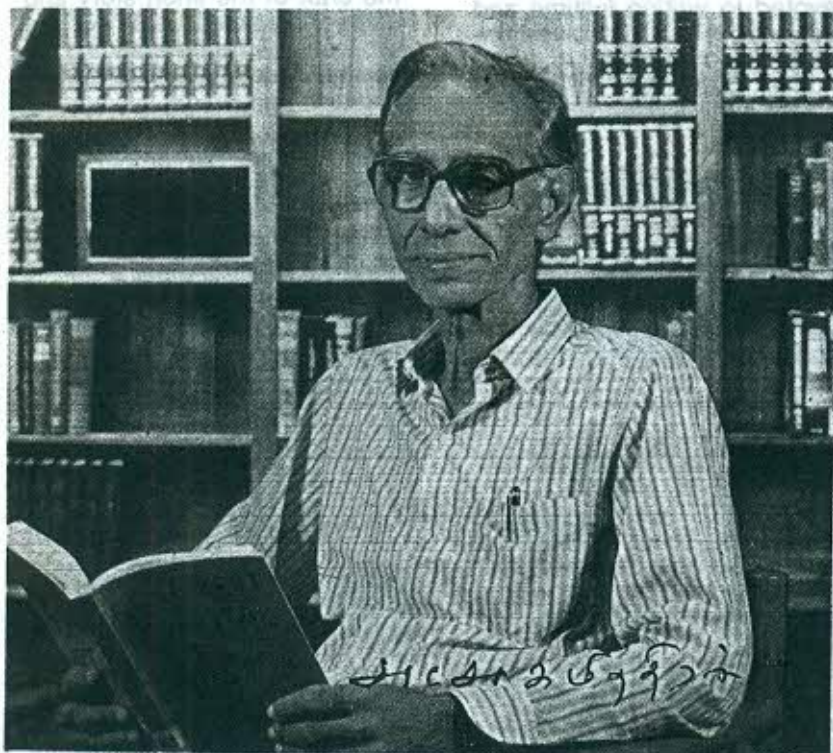
31 October 1995



Sahitya Akademi

# meet the author

**Ashokamitran**





Receiving Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award from Mother Teresa

Considered a high priest of modern Indian fiction, Ashokamitran writing in Tamil is a trend-setter in portraying the emotions and aspirations, the hopes and fears, the inner heavens and hells of the emerging modern middle class with an eye for detail and a kind pen that shows the gloomy side, but also soothes the reader.

He is a most consistent novelist and short story writer devoted to writing fulltime and has established himself as the authentic representative of the middle class of the Tamil society over a period of nearly forty years.

His output consists today of nine novels, ten collections of short stories, two collections of novellas and four books of literary criticism. His approach is characterised by humanistic insight, absence of dramatic flourishes, and a realistic portrayal of the social scene. His low-key style, authentic description and focus on a vast range of varied people are acclaimed by critics. His experiments with narrative techniques, styles and forms have added new dimensions to the art of story telling. Ashokamitran feels that literature and fine arts may seem to have an independent existence but in a subtle and inescapable manner they are all tied up with the society.

Another notable view of his is that all his stories and novels are in fact no separate independent pieces but parts one whole mass of writing.

Commenting on an Ashokamitran story in 1971, Nayantara Sahgal opined that Ashokamitran had a brutal directness in the telling that required no extra flourishes and employed none. 'He has a very sure pen.' Ashokamitran is a master storyteller. He knows the craft of the short story and each of his stories is an aid to a progressive understanding of complex psychology of human beings.

Born in a middle class family on 22 September 1931 at Secunderabad, Ashokamitran was brought up during the Nizam's twilight era in Hyderabad State and his personal life has two distinct spans of experience. His youth witnessed the patriotic upsurge of Gandhian era and the terrors that characterised a helpless population before the integration of the Hyderabad State into the Indian union by a police action. The other half of his experience is his years with the movie community of Madras. He became a fulltime writer in 1966.

Apart from fiction he has written four books of essays, a tele-play and a literary autobiography. He has done considerable translation from



With Mr. R.K. Narayan

English to Tamil and vice-versa.

**Karaindha Nizhalgal** (Dissolved Shadows) is a novel which pictures the make-believe world of cinema, tracing the course of a film which refuses to get completed though everyone connected with it undergoes changes which are sublime, ridiculous, absurd and sometimes plain pathetic.

**Thanneer** (water) is a much-acclaimed novel in which the author brings out some poignant situations experienced by the urban population of Madras during drought. Narration is matter of fact and undramatic. The random mosaic of humdrum ordinary incidents falls in the distinct pattern of life later. Standing in line with pots and buckets, running from one source to another, getting up at odd hours of the night to work hand-pump, and casting aside dignity in begging a potful from others - the whole scene is recreated with all the emerging pettiness, selfishness, greed and callousness in crisis situation. Gita Narayanan feels that his understanding of human behaviour is for always, eliciting from the reader - recognition, a wry self-awareness and hopefully, greater fellow-feeling for others in the same condition.

An important novel  
**Pathinettavathu Atchakkodu**

describes the historic event of the takeover of Hyderabad State by the Indian Government and the terror and turmoil that preceded the police action. This is a gentle and moving novel that understates, marks, laughs and weeps gently. Chandru, an ordinary young man narrates the story through many-layered cultural experiences. The Hindu-Muslim neighbours and the colourful Anglo-Indian people come out in spectacular colours. The boy witnesses violent incidents and in the end he has a trauma when a young girl mistaking him to be a rioter, offers herself to him in panic and pleads with him to save the rest of the family. The novel



A painting of Ashokamiran by the  
Artist Dave Russell

records the hopes, confusion, terror and initiation of a boy to the shocking and violent ways of the adult world.

**Akaya Thamarai** (Lotus in the Sky) is a novel of the weird illusions nurtured by all in business today. **Inru** (Today) is a novel of a period in India when it was thought that freedom and democracy would no longer be possible. **Otran!** (Spy!) is a novel about a group of writers from various countries brought together in an American town and it is a study of diversity of cultural attitudes.

Ashokamitran's short stories portray society in a myriad ways where even people and incidents not quite pleasant are depicted artfully with an eye for streaks of humanity. In his story **Yugadharmam**, a young boy is shocked when his father asks him why he didn't resort to copying like all other boys. In another story **Service**, the mother who gets back her child lost in a crowd, is not affected as the man who has found the child.

The senior litterateur Nakulan feels that the world of Ashokamitran is peopled by victims. The haves and the power-mongers are past-masters in the art of hypocrisy

and the victims are taken in by their apparently affable manners.

The short story **Kuri** (Forecast) gives an ambiguous portrayal of a Mataji and the unfortunate people drawn towards seeking help from the supernatural.

Ashokamitran has been an inspiration to a host of young writers nurtured by him through the little magazine movement. He had a long association with the magazine **Kanayazhi**, to name one.

Personally, Ashokamitran feels that his view of the world is close to the Buddhistic approach to life which emphasises the futility of the gratification of desires and not taking anyone or anything for granted as too insignificant.

His short stories have been translated and published in almost all Indian languages and also in English and several European languages. He has received awards from Ilakkiya Chintanai, a literary trust, Government of Tamilnadu and a few other organisations. A recent one is the Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award.

His novels **18th Parallel**, **Water** and **Shoot at Site** are available in English translation. He lives in Madras.



With Prof. U.R. Anantha Murthy, President, Sahitya Akademi

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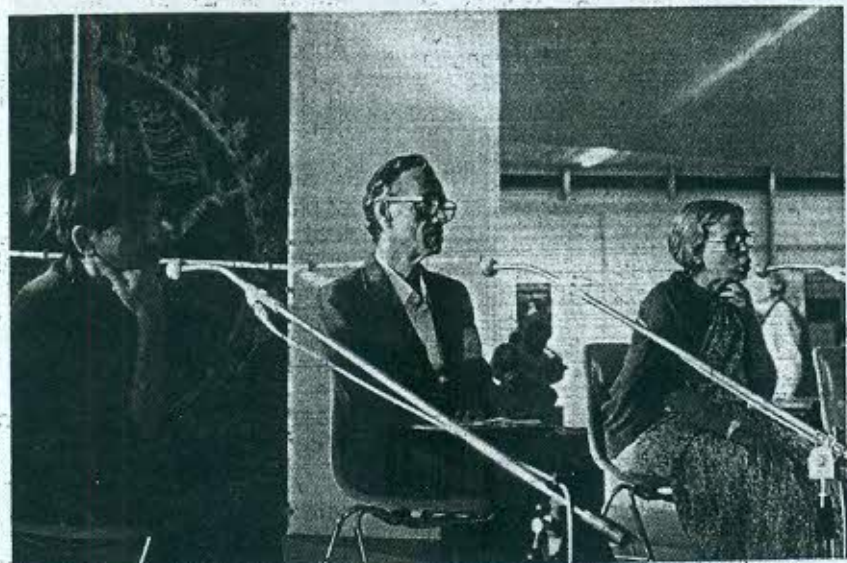
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Nirmal Verma, Ashokamitran and Mahaswetha Devi

## A CHRONOLOGY

1931	Born, Secunderabad	1984	Ilakkia Chintanai Awards for both Short Story of the Year and Book of the Year.
1952-66	Associated with Gemini Film Studios, Madras.	1985	Santhome Award for 'consistently promoting human values.'
1966	Fulltime creative writer.	1985	Tamil Nadu Government "Fiction of the Year" Award; also in 1987 and 1990.
1971	Winner of All-India Short Story contest conducted by the Illustrated Weekly of India.	1986	Guest, Frankfurt Book Fair.
1973-74	Creative Writing Fellowship in University of Iowa - International Writing Programme	1987	Jury, National Film Festival, New Delhi.
1977	Chief Guest - Tamil Novel Centenary Seminar - University of Srilanka, Jaffna, 1977.	1989	Director, Sahitya Akademi Translation Workshop (Tamil)
1977	Ilakkia Chinthanai Book of the Year Award	1990	Senior Fellowship, Government of India.
1978-84	Member, Film Certification Board, Government of India.	1992	Resource Person Indo-US Writers' Workshop Sahitya Akadmi, New Delhi.
1983	Literary Criterion Fellowship, Mysore.	1992	Lily Memorial Literary Award, Coimbatore.
		1994	Fellowship, Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio, Italy.
		1995	Ramakrishna Jaidayal Harmony Award.



With his wife and family