CHAPTER II
BRIEF LIFE-SKETCHES OF THE NOVELISTS AND THEIR FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Gleanings from the biographies of a novelist invariably reveal his personality. Hence an attempt is made here to point out the important events in the lives of Dickens and Jayakantan in relation to their literary career.

Dickens

Dickens is the representative novelist of the Victorian Age whereas Jayakantan is the representative novelist of the 20th century Tamil Nadu. Dickens is one of the immortals of English fiction. He is the foremost novelist of the Victorian Age. He is easily the most popular among the novelists of all time. He has been acclaimed as the master of the sunniest smiles and most unselfish tears. He was a great actor, reporter, orator, moralist, humorist, journalist and caricaturist. He was not only a great novelist but also a great entertainer—perhaps the greatest entertainer in the history of English fiction. He possessed the power of creating individual characters and in his inexhaustible fertility he is next only to Shakespeare. In this connection Walter Allen says
"Dickens is the greatest genius among the English imaginative writers. As a whole he is second to only Shakespeare" (93).

Jayakantan

Jayakantan is the finest writer of fiction among contemporary men of fiction. He is one of the most originals of living novelists. Jayakantan is a household word wherever Tamilians live. His stories and essays published over the years in Tamil journals have commanded a very wide readership. Reissued in book form they have again generally received favourable reception from the reading public. Indeed, his books often get to be reprinted several times. One of his books Cila Nāraṇ kālīl Cila Māṇītarkāḷ has received a Sakitya Akademi award as the best work in Tamil published in 1971. In October 1973 the National Book Trust published a selection of his short stories.

Both Had Painful Experiences of Early Life.

Dickens : Birth and Parentage :

No creative artist ever had a more unpromising birth and upbringing than Dickens. Dickens was born on 7th February 1812 at Portsea. His father,
John Dickens was a clerk in the Navy Pay-Office. He was an affectionate and generous man but he lacked in thrift and foresight. In this connection Walter Allen writes:

John Dickens was an able man in his own way, but he had one great weakness: he was completely lacking in any sense of money and could never master the art of making both ends meet. He was expensive and jolly by nature, given to the exuberant, genial gesture. It was, therefore, bad luck that his wife was as spendthrift and muddle-headed as himself. He (Dickens) had suffered bitterly at their hands, and it was his father's way with money that was to blame (94).

Dickens was the second of six children. He was the eldest among the sons. A touch of ill-health prevented him from participating in the usual children's games. He had to amuse himself by reading novels. His family was not particularly literary. But they had a collection of novels – the major works of Defoe, Cervantes, Smollet, Fielding and Goldsmith. Dickens would often crawl up into a lonely garret and lose himself in reading these classics.
Poverty and work in a Blacking Factory

From Portsea the family moved to Chatham when Dickens was three years old; his father had been promoted and was now at the government dockyard there. For a few years all went well. John Dickens lived consistently beyond his means, got hopeless into debt, and was recalled to London. Dickens, ignorant of the desperate circumstances of his family, followed and found them living in one of the poorest streets. In February 1824 his father was arrested for debt and taken to the Marshalsea Prison. The family situation was now almost critical: there was no money to buy bread and the boy was forced to pawn his precious books one by one. In this connection Walter Allen says "Often there was no dinner. The family possessions had to be pawned or sold and the first articles to go were Charles's cherished books" (96). But worse was to come—an experience so bitter and humiliating that it continued to haunt him throughout his life. His parents found a job for him in Warren's Blacking Factory owned by a relative. For six months in utter despair, Dickens, still little more than a child, worked in the dirty, rat-infested old house sticking labels on blacking bottles. This was the first raw impact of life on the sensitive nerves of a boy who had lived in a dream.
world. From a psychological point of view, the boy experienced a sense of complete betrayal by those from whom he was expected love and protection.

The Callousness of His Mother

When his father left prison, Dickens thought that this would mean an end to his own shame and degradation. But the family was in no hurry to take the boy away from the gainful employment and he remained in the factory until his father quarrelled with the relative who owned it and the boy was removed. Even then his mother was in favour of patching up the quarrel and sending the boy back. Dickens could never forget throughout his life this attitude of his mother. Years later, when he was a man he always tried to avoid the locality where the particular factory was situated, and he never forgave his mother.

The Effect of the Painful Experiences of Early Life

After leaving the factory Dickens resumed his schooling at Wellington House Academy. But the mischief had been done. In the depths of his nature a split had occurred; a sensitive, delicate boy had been plunged into experiences that could only have been endured by somebody tough and obstinate. The vision of a world of grim,
twisted shapes, deformed, exaggerated caricatures, a world full of horrid images impressed itself permanently upon the soul of a child. It was thus that he always continued to see the Victorian scene. Loving beauty, he had, during his childhood, been forced into contact with the seamier side of life, with dirt, squalor, shame, humiliation. The resulting disgust and utter helplessness were ineradicable. He had seen the sordid underworld of London, inhabited by men and women, diseased in mind and body, where the victims of some vast incomprehensible system were oppressed and destroyed.

Jayakantan: His Birth and parentage

Like Dickens, Jayakantan too had painful experiences of early life. He was born at Kāṭalūr on 24th April, 1934. Like Dickens, he too received little affection in his early years. His father, M. Tantapāṇi pillai followed his own individualistic and unfettered course, running through the property he had inherited. He evinced no interest in his family. "When I speak of my family, I do not include my father" (Chapter I) Jayakantan writes in his book A Literary Man's Political Experiences:

Tamil Nadu Politics since 1946. His harassed mother Makālakmiyammāl who bore many sorrows including the
deaths of some children born after Jayakantan, did not feel drawn to him. He was uncared for. And he was unruly and stubborn. Just as Dickens lived over again his own days of childhood, Jayakantan too recollected his childhood days. In a preface to a collection of stories relating to children published in 1961, Jayakantan writes feelingly of

those children with their tender bodies and their seductive smiles, with no assurance of any 'life' in future - the castaways with no right to live, the orphans of society, the flesh of my flesh.

I say this because my childhood was more or less like that. The lot of the children who played with me then, and who play with me now - for most of them life appears to be fruitless.

A child is not merely a theme for a story; a child is a social issue too. The Prime Minister of this country may describe children as the 'flowers of Bharat' and celebrate 'Children's Day' once a year. But one is filled with agony when one sees these flowers crushed under the heels of society. Such is the reality of life.
One feels like sobbing about over this horror.... (Tēvan 17-18).

His Education

If Dickens left his school when he was fifteen, Jayakantan ran away from his school when he was eleven. Jayakantan's mother sent him to a local "pial" school and subsequently to a nondescript institution in the neighbourhood. His record as a student was entirely undistinguished. He evinced no interest at all in his studies. He did like some of his teachers as, for instance, Radhakrishna Iyer, who struggled hard to teach him English and make him spell such exotic words as ZEBRA. It was all too much for the youngster and he decided to run away from the big city - Madras. He was 11 years old at that time. He got into the Shencottah passenger without a ticket and he was off to the big city without a coin in his pocket.

His Hardship

In Madras Jayakantan was hungry and lonesome. Soon he was led to think of his mother. And that feeling of horror! He had seen the big city. There was nothing more to keep him there. He had to go back home by train without a ticket. Jayakantan did not turn over a new leaf
even after his escapade. He became less and less interested in what went on in his classroom. The classroom appeared to be a jail. He was enormously interested in what went on in the free world outside the school. There was a picture of Mahatma Gandhi hanging in the room of his house. The boy believed that he had seen Gandhi and he felt that he should serve Gandhi's cause.

He listened to the visitors in his house when they talked about India's problems and the movement against the British. There was a maternal uncle, Maṅgaḷam Pillai, who regarded himself as a Gandhian and who sincerely believed in the constructive programme of the country's travails. And there was another maternal uncle who used to visit the house often, P. Purushothaman. They said he was a communist and that he worked full time for the communist party. The boy heard Purushothaman talk with his associates not only about Gandhi but men with such names as Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler. The boy disliked Hitler intensely.

He lived with his communist uncle, Purushothaman, for a few years. Then he was under the care of her mother's nephew, Radhakrishnan, who was a full time communist party worker in Madras. Jayakantan became the
foster child of the communist party as a boy. He narrates the subsequent personal evolution and his political memories thus:

In the office of Janasakthi, the official journal of the communist party, I saw around me well-read men, patriots, and persons who had made great sacrifices. Standing in their midst, I felt deeply ashamed of my degrading qualities. And I became a self-respecting man"("Cennaikku" 152-153).

Jayakantan lived in the Madras commune and performed the tasks assigned to him by the comrades. He felt that he was engaged in work of great importance. He proudly regarded himself as a communist. For about two years he became a vagrant, with occasional brief spells of stay at his mother's place Kaṭalūr.

I took up such jobs as carrying luggage at the railway station, selling "song books" at movie theatres and serving as assistant to a tongawalla. I never had the slightest feeling that I was engaged in performing lowly jobs. If I worked at these jobs with a sense of honour and dignity, it was because of what I know about
Their Formative Influences:

Just as Dickens's experiences of London streets constituted one of the decisive elements in the formation of his personality, Jayakantan's "studies" in the University of Open Road became the indispensable foundation for his subsequent literary work.

Dickens

We get several glimpses of the early life of Dickens from his own autobiographical notes. He alludes to this period of his life in David Copperfield:

..... in a little room upstairs to which I had access (for it adjoined my own), and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time, - they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of Genii,
.... When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the church yard and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life (55-56).

These books and his experiences of the London streets were to constitute his real education a little later. Dickens left school when he was fifteen. He took up a job as an office-boy in a firm of solicitors. It was a modest beginning. But he had his aspiration and was endowed with initiative and drive. Besides he had the energy and zeal to put in real hard work. He began to learn short-hand in his spare time. In 1832 Dickens left law and embarked upon a career of journalism. During this period he gained his extraordinary knowledge of inns and stage coaches, which are so vividly sketched in his novels.

Dickens was a man of divergent interests. He was also possessed of extraordinary energy which enabled him to pursue several interests at once. He frequented theatres, learnt acting and narrowly missed entering this profession. He also regularly went to the Museum Library and furthered his self-education. Thus, by the age of twenty-one, when his first published work appeared,
Dickens had acquired a solid knowledge of those subjects which run like a thread through all his novels: law, the theatre, and above all the city of London and its inhabitants.

In his book Charles Dickens, the Novelist B.P. Chaudhuri observes:

The early years of Dickens, spent in London at the Blacking Factory, at school, as a lawyer's office boy, as a reporter in the courts, were all very important. His father's imprisonment in the Marshalsea and the work of gumming in labels were branded on his memory by shame: David Copperfield and Little Dorrit are particularly the books of those years. But there is hardly a story which is not directly touched by them. Then he was learning the by-ways and slums of London: the intricacies of lawyers and the absurdities of their clerks; the full meaning of "shabby genteel": the ways of landladies and lodgers; the social pretensions of obscure men; the use of money; the sins of poverty; the value of ugliness; the love of death. All these aspects we find reflected in the novels written
by a writer of Dickens's fertility and scope (119-120).

The unforgettable experience of his early youth - that humiliating phase of life - became one of the decisive elements in the formation of his personality. Even when those hardships had been left behind, Dickens could never forget them. It was this memory, at the secret core of his very life-success - that continued to sustain the energy of his effort to secure his material independence and economic security against all risks. It helped them intensify the multiple suggestion of active charity which made Dickens an apostle and turned his work into a gospel of humanitarinism.

Jayakantan

As a vagrant Jayakantan was enrolled in the University of the open road. His "studies" in the University were to be the indispensable foundation for his subsequent literary work. In a preface to the collection of sketches that he wrote several years later entitled Nān Cantita Ivarkal Jayakantan wrote:

There was a time in the past when I had made it my objective to become one with these humble. I had lived under their benevolent and affectionate
care. With them I could truly feel the vital throb of life - a sense of being alive. They were highly sentimental and emotional. They had hearts like those of children.

In the days I lived with people of this class I ate their food with the greatest relish. I still like their food. I imagine even now the fragrance and flavour of the food that they hospitably shared with me, and I am filled with happiness.

With what "manly" unawareness do such people face the challenge flung at them by this life, this society and this economic system!

In the streets and pavements of Madras I had sat around with the humble folk. Lying on the pavements and smoking bidies, I had talked right through the night with these friends without a wink of sleep. I know not what they found in me that they appreciated. "Have some tea", "here is a bidi for you," - how cheerfully they used to run towards me, greet me, and ply me with questions!
Meeting them again and again is Life. I can never become tired of it" (114-115).

In another essay he wrote on the same theme:

There was a time when I numbered among my close friends, rickshaw-pullers, prostitutes, rowdies, pickpockets, and cigarette butt scavengers. Perhaps because of that fact I can never work up a disgust towards their kind. Sometimes I even wonder whether I would not have been happier if I had decided to live among them as one of the "family". Truly, an attraction for their life came to be planted in my youthful mind..... There is in the life of such people a flaming passion, a liveliness, and truth! (Cennaikku Vantēn, 154).

Jayakantan believes and says that he "derived his learning" by talking with numerous human beings. I grew by that process: I was also eroded by it. But even as I got eroded, I also continued to grow. Because even then I was talking with you! Thus the friends around me, the persons that I meet in the world at large, have taught me to speak, to write and to think." He adds: "I am a
Vagrant in the great outdoors. I live in the open. I delight at looking intently at the world, at life, and at human beings, I write what I say, and what I hear" (Preface to Inippum Karippum 5-6).

Jayakantan returned to Madras in 1950 and found refuge for a while in the house of an uncle in perampūr. It was then that he began to write:

I did not think that I could ever make a living of writing. Indeed, I did not even know that there existed a class of persons known as "writers". I did not have any writer as a friend and no "big man" enthused me to take to writing. And I wrote. I found it pleasant and satisfying. I enjoyed the feeling. That was all (Cennaiku Vantēn 154).

"Communist party was banned. I wandered throughout Tamil Nadu with my Comrades. The experiences that I got then induced me to write" (Kumutam 28 Apr. 1994). Once a friend of his uncle who was an assistant editor of a journal named Caupākyam asked him to write a story. It was published and a new name made its entry into the world of Tamil writers. Soon Jayakantan became an "established writer". Participating in 'Meeting the Author Programme' Jayakantan said: "My story is different from
all the stories. I am not a character in any of my stories. It is dangerous for a writer to become a character in his own works". (Indian Express, 16 Dec, 1989).

S. Viswanathan sums up what Jayakantan said while participating in the programme thus:

He said it all started with his attempt to understand people, to understand the contradictions in human relations. Even at a tender age he was confronted with the problem of conflicts among people, contradiction between man and woman, between father and mother. 'You have to know where you stand in this society of contradictions'. ..... Jayakantan said the world remains divided between the cheats and the cheated, the exploiters and the exploited, the mighty and the meek, the rich and the poor, the bad and the good. 'One does not react to every situation in life instantly. One keeps his feelings in 'reserve'. Anything kept in the 'reserve' or preserved gets a metabolic change, it gets a changed character with new dimensions. Such reserved feelings and thoughts burst out at
a later stage as speeches and writings. I felt that in this divided world I was with the underprivileged, the cheated, the exploited and the meek. I thought I should raise my voice against injustice and that was my Dharma, Sudharma!' Mr. Jayakantan continued: Whether one writes or not or how often one writes is immaterial. What is more important is how one lives and understands human relations and on whose side one stands in the ongoing conflicts - with the exploiter or the exploited, with the cheat or cheated. And I have always stood with the latter (Indian Express, 16 Dec 1989).

Their Creative Energy

Both are prolific writes. Like Dickens, Jayakantan too is a versatile genius. Both of them have to their credit innumerable novels, short stories and essays.

Dickens

In 1835 appeared his first book Sketches by Boz and in 1836-37 serially Pickwick papers. With this his fame and fortune were made. Never before had a novel appeared so full of vitality and merriment. The
succeeding years saw the publication in astonishingly quick succession of a number of novels - Oliver Twist (1837-39), Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39) The old curiosity shop (1840-1) and a historical novel, Barnaby Rudge (1841). All these novels appeared in monthly instalments.

In 1842, Dickens, accompanied by his wife, went on a tour of America and Canada. His reputation as a novelist had already reached there and he was given a rousing welcome wherever he went. After his return from the tour and as a result of it Dickens wrote Martin Chuzzlewit. Next came Dombey and Son (1846-48) and David Copperfield (1849-50). His later novels include Bleak House (1852-3), Hard Times (1854-2) and Little Dorrit (1855-7).

On account of domestic troubles Dickens went through a comparatively unproductive period following his Little Dorrit. But very soon he wrote A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations (1860-1) and (1959) Our Mutual Friend (1864). In 1870 he brought out the first instalment of Edwin Drood, which he never finished. Besides these novels, Dickens has many essays and short stories to his credit.
The strenuous literary life he had already led told upon his health, and these labours further undermined it so that the novel he had begun in 1869, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was not destined to be completed. For on the 9th of June 1870, on which day he had summoned up his energies to add a few more chapters to his last novel, he suddenly took ill and died shortly afterwards. He was buried with pomp in Westminster Abbey, an honour which he fully deserved.

Referring to his popularity, B.P. Chaudhuri says:

In fifty years Dickens had risen to the top, not only of his profession but of the social scaler. He had been received by Queen Victoria, his daughter had been presented at Court, peers and Statesmen were among his intimate friends: all this had been achieved not as a result of his wealth but in America, all over Europe, and in the East, his name and his characters were household words (Dickens 5).

*Jayakantan*

Jayakantan has to his credit 40 novels, 200 short stories, 15 collection of essays besides a few
translations. He still continues to write. Once when he participated in "Meeting the Author Programme", he was asked why he had not been writing much in recent years. Denying that he was not writing these days, he said, "I go on writing as ever before. If you do not read it, it has not reached you perhaps" (Indian Express, 16 Dec, 1989).

Jayakantan has not left even the film world untouched. His novels Unnaipōl oruvan, yārukāka Alutan, Kaival vilanku, Cila Nērāṅkalil Cila Manītarkal, Karuṇaiyāḷ Allā, Oru Naṭikai Naṭakam Pārkirāl have been filmed. He has written story and dialogue to Kāval Teyvam. He has penned lyrics to the films Cila Nērāṅkalil Cila Manītarkal, Oru Naṭikai Naṭakam Pārkirāl and Karuṇai Ullam. He was also the director of the film Yārūkkāka Alutan.

Jayakantan's works have been translated into various languages like English, German and Russian. His first short story appeared in the journal Caupākyam in 1950. Since then his works have been published in journals and magazines.