This interview was tape-recorded in Dr. Indira Parthasarathy's house at Alwarpet in Chennai on 23 January 2004. The most remarkable feature of Dr. Parthasarathy was his willingness to answer the questions with grace and sincerity, with philosophical outlook and social responsibility. Throughout the conversation, he spoke frankly and patiently about his works, Western philosophy and Tamil Literature. His tone was relaxed, friendly and interested. He was simple, courteous and comfortable.

SS: Humanistic existentialism, which focuses on self-determinism and social responsibility, forms the basis of your works. Will you agree with me if I say that you affirm life by acknowledging man's possibilities in this indifferent universe?

IP: I would agree with that. Man exists at two levels—the personal level and the social level. For example, in Tamil Literature, the personal level is portrayed as Akam and here the emphasis is on internal life. At the social level, man has to practise universal love. There should be a harmony between self-determinism and social responsibility. At the same time the individual need not sacrifice his values. The point is that individual freedom should not interfere with the smooth functioning of society.
SS: How do you link self-determinism and social responsibility?

IP: Responsibility means what the individual owes to the society. Responsibility itself means a condition. In spite of difficulties, man should realize his social responsibility. There should be a balance.

SS: Your vision, that is, humanistic existentialism, has a lot in common with Sartre's existentialism. Does it show his influence on you?

IP: I admit that I have been influenced by Sartre, Husserl and Heidegger. I prefer the theistic side of existentialism to the atheistic side. Existentialism is not something new. It is found in Bhagavath Gita. Arjuna finds himself in an existential crisis when he has to choose whether to fight or not. Your action justifies what you are going to do. Sartre has given the idea in the form of a theory, giving names like Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself. What I do in my fiction is that I try to project my characters in such situations. I don't baptize them.

SS: I find the influence not only of Sartre but also of Camus and other existentialist philosophers on your thought process. Dhruv in AT is like Camus' Sisyphus. Both Dhruv and Sisyphus scorn the world while doing the tasks.

IP: Your view is correct. The emphasis is on the absurdity of human existence.

SS: Many of your characters are caught up in a highly materialistic society and are searching for identity. They also suffer from alienation
and existential dilemma. Do you think, in a country like India, where the joint family system still operates, there is room for alienation and existential estrangement?

**IP:** Alienation is felt more in the present age. When I was a child, every festival was celebrated with enthusiasm. Now I find changes in the attitude of the children in our country. Once in Poland, a number of doctors, engineers and professors had to work as taxi drivers during internal immigration. In the Western world, broken families create many problems. The next generation in India will also experience such problems. This has become a reality in big cities like New Delhi.

**SS:** Do you say that alienation has increased in the present age?

**IP:** Yes. It has increased because of urbanization and materialistic aspect of society. But alienation has always existed in different forms. As long as there is independent thinking, alienation will also be present.

**SS:** In your book *Indira Parthasarathy Katturalikal*, you have said that man in the present world is likely to become a schizophrenic because of the existential crisis of determining his path of action, detached from the past in which the concept of God was a great consolation for him. You have pointed out that only from this perspective, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Grass' *The Tin Drum*, Beckett's *Watt*, Anthony Burgess' *A Clock Work Orange*, Updike's *The Centaur* and Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* should be studied. What do you mean by this?
**IP**: In the post-war era, man has lost his complacency. In the past the concept of God enabled man to some extent to be at peace with himself. But the modern man is alienated not only from others but also from himself. He is not convinced of what he should do. When one is not convinced of his action, one will have to face psychological problems. Today man has to function at two levels—he has to protest and also to act. Doing a thing without conviction leads to psychological strain. Though alienation is perennial, it has become intense after the war. People do not have much faith today. I don’t have that much of faith as my grandmother had. All these works should be analysed only from this angle.

**SS**: Freud says: “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.” In Tamil Literature we find many examples. *Tolkāppiyam* and Sangam literature give much importance to the emotions of characters. In *Kambarāmāyanā* and *Cilappatikāram*, the art of characterization indicates psychological approach. In *Ulā* and *Tūtū*, the emotions which cannot be expressed explicitly are revealed through personal songs of love. What do you say about the relationship between psychology and literature?

**IP**: There is a close relationship between psychology and literature. Literature reflects the psychological feelings of human beings. Freud has given us the concept of the unconscious in the form of a theory.
This is his contribution. He has done it in a systematic way. But this has always existed. In *The Mahabharatha* the unfolding of the unconscious is described in a wonderful manner. Krishna asks Pandavas and Draupathi to reveal what they actually think at the moment in order to attain a particular thing. Draupathi says frankly that when she met Krishna for the first time she began to love him. This is a typical Freudian approach. However, for a creative writer, all these theories are not necessary. A mother who gives birth to a child need not study embryology.

**SS:** When I reconstruct the inner dynamics of your works, I find them to be psychological in their primal aspect. For example, the novels—*Vēcañkal, KP, Tivukal, TA, UV, VTK* and *AT*—show the psychoanalytic approach. Do you believe that psychologizing forms the very structure of aesthetic experience?

**IP:** I don't want my point to be missed when it is said to the reader. So some kind of psychologizing is necessary. Basically the average Tamil reader is different from the average English reader. When the English reader comes across the lines—"If Winter comes, / Can Spring be far behind?"—he immediately associates them with Shelley. Such scholarship is not expected from the Tamil reader. So I have to give the material so that the reader may not miss the point. Psychologizing is necessary to provide aesthetic experience to the reader.
SS: In your article, "Fingerprints: On Creativity and Responsibility," you refer to Conrad's statement that "Art attempts to find in the universe, in matter, as well as in the facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential." Saul Bellow quotes these words of Conrad in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. What is the "fundamental, enduring, essential" thing your art attempts to find in the universe?

IP: The fundamental, enduring, essential thing is the essential goodness of man.

SS: Saul Bellow's fiction shows the confluence of Jewish culture and American cultural background. Your novels display the confluence of Indian cultural background and Western philosophic thought. I think both Jewish culture and Indian culture are essentially affirmative. What is your opinion?

IP: As you have said, both are basically affirmative. The Jewish tolerance is found in Indian tradition also. Indian culture has an optimistic outlook as its base.

SS: I'm referring to the values found in both Jewish and Indian cultures.

IP: Do you mean the values are affirmative?

SS: Yes. The enduring spirit and acceptance of suffering indicate affirmation. In spite of alienation and estrangement, there is a strong note of affirmation in Jewish literature.
IP: You're correct. Similarly the Hindu middle-class values are basically affirmative.

SS: Shall I say that this affirmation is reinforced by your study of Western philosophy?

IP: I think the fundamental values never change. Great people have tried to bring out social reformation, but the fundamental values have not changed. Ramanujar introduced a new line of thought, but the fundamental value remains the same, that is, the importance of humanism. The values need not be negative. The point is that how we are going to accommodate these values to suit a particular system so that man may raise himself to a higher level. All our studies should have this idea as the primary aim.

SS: How do you estimate Saul Bellow as a novelist?

IP: I consider him one of the greatest novelists of this era. The first Saul Bellow novel I read was Herzog. The hero is writing letters to many people including Mahatma Gandhi. I also like Mr.Sammler's Planet. But I don't think I've been influenced by him. I like his style and the way of expressing his ideas.

SS: You have said: "Like a kite that needs the resistance of air to fly, I need a reader," and to support this view, you have referred to Christopher Caudwell's statement that "A sunset is nothing to a beast,
art makes it what it is to us." Do you consider creative writing a social act essentially?

**IP:** Creative writing is a social act. I don't believe in the dictum that a writer writes for himself. Why do you come to the business of writing if it is not your aim to communicate to someone? Some people may talk about Kafka. He did not worry about publishing his works and all that. Yet when he wrote something, he wanted to express himself to somebody. Though a writer is not bothered about publishing his works, it cannot be denied that he writes mainly to share his thoughts with someone, whoever the person may be. I firmly believe that creative writing is a social act. I know I have to be exceptionally aware of people around me. This will naturally involve a kind of responsibility—personal, social and moral. It is but necessary that I must have compassion, involvement and charity.

**SS:** Do you believe in the existence of God? How do you view Nietzsche's concept of God?

**IP:** Whether one believes in the existence of God or not, one needs a God. There is a psychological need of a God. Once man believed that he could completely depend on science because it gave him evidences. But now science is becoming more and more abstract like philosophy. There are many things in the universe which defy a satisfactory scientific explanation. There are many absurd things which we are not able to understand. A proper explanation for the happening of these
things is eluding. In Balzac's novel, The Quest of the Absolute, there is a character who tries to prove the existence of God. He gets only frustration. I don't think we are endowed with such knowledge as to probe into these mysteries. The more we try to know the more we find the extent of our ignorance. Man always tries to understand reality. Reality means Sath. Sath is a beautiful word. It means "Is" or "Being." In a sense, "reality" is not the correct translation of Sath. I don't worry about the question of the existence of God. My search for truth, my knowledge of the universe and my experience in life make me humble.

SS: Do you believe in “Art for Art's Sake Theory”?

IP: No. I don't believe in it.

SS: The Sociological Approach of literary criticism holds that art is not created in a vacuum and that the aim of art is to reform society. Charles Dickens' fiction is an example. What, according to you, is the function of literature in the present context?

IP: I agree with the view that art is not created in a vacuum. But the relationship between art and society should not be seen from the utility point of view. A good work of art portrays the essential goodness of man. All our epics focus on the essential goodness of man through various characters. The influence of literature on society is always there. Literature has its own sociological value. But this should not be judged from the utility point of view.
SS: I'd like to ask a few questions related to Laa.Sa.Raa's interview, published in the book *Laa.Sa.Raa Padaippulakam*. He says that creative writing is a kind of meditation. What is your idea of creative writing?

IP: I think he slightly romanticizes the idea. I don't want to romanticize the process of creative writing. To me, human relationship is important. Literature must focus on human relationship. Life is a never-ending dialogue between 'I and you' and the evolution of my psyche is a result of my social experience. I write to communicate.

SS: In the interview, Laa. Sa. Raa. says that everyone comes into this world, exists and departs when the work is over. Everyone is like a bubble that lasts only for a short period. Some people are like sparks of fire lasting for some more time. This is what we call human life. This idea is similar to Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players." What is your view of human life?

IP: I like to focus on the continuity of human life. When Thiruvalluvar says that the world is great, he means that the world goes on and that human life continues. The continuity of life is important. Man strives to achieve many things because of his awareness of death. He wants to leave many things to posterity only because of his knowledge of death. But death is not the endpoint.

SS: Laa.Sa.Raa. says: "If you read all my works, you will find that my works portray the journey of my soul. All the great people in the past
taught only one important thing, that is, the betterment of society. Everything was done by those great people to make the society an ideal place. You express the same idea in your introduction to the play Ramanujar—"From the beginning to the present, there is no religion which is superior to humanism."

**IP:** Yes. All our great historical heroes attained glory only because they practised humanism. In my opinion, all religions focus on humanism. Humanism should be the basis of all religious practices.

**SS:** As in the works of existentialist philosophers, death is a major theme in your novels. What is your concept of death?

**IP:** Death is the ultimate reality but it is not the end. Some of the European existentialist philosophers state that it is absurd to be born and absurd to die. But we, the Indians, believe that death is not the end. We have faith in continuity. The Western people are obsessed with two things—one is sex and the other is death. But we are influenced by our Indian tradition and are not obsessed with these things. This is because we don't have the sense of guilt with regard to sex. Our ancestors were satisfied with the system of family life that existed in that period. But in the Western world, especially in the post-war era, life involves many challenges. So their concept of death is based on the dimension of the challenges. For us, life is not so hard. For the Westerners, it is difficult to lead a peaceful life because of the great wars. The changes in climate also create many problems. When I
went to Poland for the first time, I wondered how people managed to live in that land. In winter the tops of the trees will be covered with snow. Within a few days there will be beautiful flowers. The transitoriness of life is fully realized by the people in the Western countries. Another factor is the idea of marriage. For them, marriage is not permanent. When I celebrated the silver jubilee of my married life in Poland, my Polish friends, most of them who were my students, asked me how my wife and I had been tolerating each other for such a long period! When I visited the universities in Canada, I was repeatedly asked to deliver lectures on the concept of death. Since the Second World War death has become a great obsession for the Westerners. It is not so in India. Scientific facts may tell us that death is the end. But the tradition to which we belong has taught us that death is not the end.

SS: Critics like C. Kanagasabapathy have pointed out that you have given importance to an individual's perverted feelings in the novel, KP, instead of describing the beginning of a great revolution. Your opinion?

IP: KP was criticised only by the Marxist critics. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had a positive note about KP. It was the CPI (M) that criticised the portrayal of the character of Kanniah Naidu. However, KP was serialized in a Marxist magazine in Malayalam. In my reply I clearly stated that I was a novelist and that I did not intend to write a document. As a novelist, I had reacted to a particular situation in my
own way. During the process of fictionalization, all the characters were internalized. In the Keezha Venmani carnage, 26 women and 12 children were burnt alive. My question was why so many helpless women and innocent children became victims. I approached the problem from Freudian psycho-analytic perspective and understood that what had happened was Kanniah Naidu's method of taking revenge on nature that had wronged him. Apart from the economic and social problems involved in the story, I looked at it basically as a human story. The Marxists expected it to be a manifesto of revolution. They did not bother to note that I had fictionalized the incident.

SS: Gopal and Siva play an important role in shaping the revolution in KP. Why do you bring these two intellectuals from Delhi to Keezha Venmani?

IP: A good question! Definitely I could not have felt as an insider. The language spoken by Gopal and Siva was different from that of the villagers and I felt at ease in proceeding in that way. In order to portray my reflections on the incident and be true to myself, I introduced these two characters.

SS: What is your idea of birth, death and time?

IP: Thiruvalluvar focuses on these aspects, relating to the transitoriness of human life: “As 'day' it vaunts itself; well understood, it is 'knife' that daily cuts away a portion from thy life.” According to Parimelazhagar,
time is only a man-made calculation. In my opinion, birth, death and
time form a continuity.

SS: Regarding the technological approach to writing, you have said in
“Fingerprints” that writing a novel or a short story or a play is “much
more like having a baby than constructing a bridge. You have referred
to the view of Mrozek in this context. All the literary outputs of Mrozek
only reveal his spontaneous response to the Polish social and political
climate of that period. Is it not necessary for a writer to learn the
technological aspects of writing?

IP: How an incident influences a writer and how authentic it is are more
important than technological aspects. When a work of art is dissected
without taking into consideration what it intends to say, it no longer
remains the same; only the technological aspect remains. Now-a-days
writers brand their works as post-modern and post-structural, etc. In
such cases, the form is given more importance than the content. The
subject of a literary work is more important than the number of pages.
Creative work is a spontaneous response to a certain event. Faulkner
once said: “If a young writer is interested in technique, he would be a
fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people
learn only by error.” I’d also like to refer to Aldous Huxley’s statement
that “the astonishingness of the most obvious things can even be the
subject matter of creative writing.” So I start writing after convincing
myself that there are no rules and precedents for me to follow.
SS: Thus you differentiate between an engineer and a creative writer.

IP: Yes. An engineer who is going to build a house has to equip himself with all the technological aspects required for the task. But a young woman need not be an expert on genetics or embryology if she decides to have a baby.

SS: In order to delve deep into a character or a scene, you often use interior monologue. For example, the character of Jayaraman in MV is revealed through this technique. Do you use it consciously and deliberately as a technique?

IP: It has been conscious but I have used it because the situation has demanded it.

SS: Do you really know how your work is going to end when you start it?

IP: It depends on the subject matter of the work. When I started writing Ramanujar, I had not decided the end. Ramanujar lived for 120 years. I could not include all the details covering his long life. However, a writer who starts writing a detective novel may know how the work is going to achieve its denouement. The important point is that the merit of a literary work is determined only by a beautiful synthesis of content and form.

SS: What stimulates you into writing a novel?
IP: It is my reaction to what affects me. I'm not a public performer and this is one reason why I might have chosen creative writing. I also feel that it is my responsibility to myself and to the society. Creative imagination operates in the dark of the mind. Writing is a kind of exploration, an intense search of the writer's own personality, an affirmation of his attitude towards life and society.

SS: Would you comment on your experience in writing TA?

IP: When it was being published in Thinamani Kathir, the editor told me that the subject matter of the novel was difficult for the readers to understand. They stopped serializing the novel. I had to complete the remaining part and publish it as a book.

SS: In your play Malai and your novel NN, you have presented the same story with different names of characters. Is there any special reason for this?

IP: It was not a deliberate attempt. I wrote Malai in 1969. That was my first play. NN was serialized later in Tamil Nesan in Malaysia. In Malai I have portrayed the relationship between the father and the daughter in a complex way. It is a love-hate relationship. Actually it was based on the incidents that happened in a family known to me in New Delhi.

SS: Another point I'd like to mention is that in NN you have described the sexual union between Samuel and Nirmala but in Malai you have not
portrayed the same between James and Nirmala. Have you done this because Malai is a drama to be acted on the stage?

**IP:** It was not a deliberate one. The affair between Samuel and Nirmala was only a part of the thinking process. It was portrayed in that way because the story should have demanded it.

**SS:** You have employed the third person narrative technique in all your novels. The first person narrative has been totally avoided. What is the reason?

**IP:** The use of the first person narrative has several limitations. The "I" cannot be everywhere. As a result I may not be able to convey everything. But I've used the first person narrative technique in my short stories. It is convenient to use the third person narrative in a novel.

**SS:** Dostoevsky says that when he is writing, he is physically ill. How do you feel when you are writing?

**IP:** I don't feel any kind of sickness. At times I don't write for months together. But when I begin, I write continuously for ten or fifteen days. Writing is an adventure into a dark and unpredictable jungle. It is an onward movement through time. Writing gives me a lot of satisfaction.

**SS:** Many of your characters are intellectuals, who often quote from Shakespeare to Sartre. Do they reflect your personality?
IP: It all depends on the situations in which the characters are placed in. All my intellectuals fit in remarkably well in the respective novels.

SS: In your interview published in Cupamañkalā, you talk about the influence of Balzac on you. You also refer to his book The Quest of the Absolute. Would you say something about the early influences on you?

IP: I've been influenced by both Tamil and English writers. I have a great love for Tamil literature, especially the novels of Pudumaipithan and T.Janakiraman. And I believe that literature transcends languages. During my university days I was influenced by Shakespeare, Milton, Aldous Huxley and Shelley. Balzac was a great influence on me.

SS: In the article “Fingerprints: On Creativity and Responsibility,” published in the journal Indian Literature, a Sahitya Akademi publication, you have mentioned that Lokenath Bhattacharya once asked you how it was possible for you to be a Tamil writer from Delhi. How do you react to the view that a plant can grow only in its own soil?

IP: Lokenath Bhattacharya remarks that Bengali literature could flourish only in Bengal. But we must remember that the best of Polish poetry was written in France when Poland was under the Russian rule. Tamil is the language which is the nearest approximation to my thoughts. Tamil is the only language with which I am historically and culturally connected. And I can use the language reasonably well. I
started writing in 1955. My stay at Delhi enabled me to get the advantage of being an observer, looking at things objectively. I am not a very exclusive plant, but one of those common plants which can grow anywhere, even in a desert! I am happy that I am in the good company of one of the Tamil poets, belonging to the Cankam era. He sings: “All are my regions; everyone is my kin.”

SS: In the same article, you have said: “As an Indian writer, writing in my own mother tongue, which is Tamil, I feel my genetic make-up, my environment, my past, my experience, my psychology, my responses, all these things, are distinctive and unique to myself, as my fingerprints are. I am convinced that if my creative writing comes from the authentic ‘I’ it will have the kind of originality that really matters.” How do you relate this idea with Chinua Achebe’s statement that “it is not only daffodils that can make a fit subject for poetry, but the palm tree too?”

IP: Any work of art will stand the test of time if it has a universal appeal. In order to achieve this universal appeal, a creative writer need not always depend on foreign objects and situations. It is Achebe’s view that unless one’s own culture begins to take itself seriously it will never get off the ground. Personally I feel that the best writing in any Indian language is far superior to Indo-Anglian writing. Many of the Indo-Anglian writers have focused on what is exciting about India to the Western mind. A few exceptions may be there. One such exception
is Salman Rushdie who deals with the genuine problems of the contemporary period.

SS: Which one of your novels you are most satisfied with?

IP: It is very difficult to say.

SS: In his letter to V.S. Joseph Albert, who has done his doctoral research comparing your works with those of Arthur Miller, Prof. T.B. Siddhalingaiah says that your stay at the Annamalai University for PG studies opened up new vistas and that you were an angry young man “hurt by and annoyed with hypocrisy, pseudo-religionism, half-hearted rituals and religious practices, political debauchery, etc.” What is your comment?

IP: Yes. I was an angry young man. I hated the hypocrisy that was present in the environment in which I was brought up. I began to rationalize things. My experience at Delhi later helped me a lot. During one of my visits to Canada, I was asked to talk about the greatness of Indian culture. A Punjabi requested me to advise the young Indians in Canada about the problem of dating and other things. I don’t like such hypocrisy. The Indian parents want their children to have the best of both the worlds. How is this possible?

SS: You have often talked about the character of Kannagi in Cilappatikāram. You have compared Kannagi to a machine and you have said that Cilappatikāram describes the desert-like nature of a
marriage without the union of minds. And you have stated the reasons for this—i) According to the epic tradition, the title of the epic should be the name of the protagonist. But in Cilappatikāram it is not so; ii) Kannagi does not possess the particular virtue to win the love of Kovalan; iii) To Kannagi, marriage is an institution needed to extend hospitality to others; iv) When Kovalan describes the beauty of Kannagi in high poetry, she does not respond; and v) Kannagi, unlike Madhavi and Cleopatra, fails to provide aesthetic contentment to Kovalan. But if we consider the period in which Cilappatikāram was written, the delineation of the character of Kannagi seems to be faultless. Is it not so?

IP: My point is that Kannagi, compared with Madhavi, remains silent on several occasions. What I have written is only a deconstruction of what has been described. The point is already there and I've added nothing new to it.

SS: You are the winner of many prestigious awards. What is your feeling about this kind of recognition?

IP: I'm happy that my works have won such awards. I consider myself fortunate that one of my best works was selected for the Sahitya Akademi Award. But a creative writer does not write for awards. As a writer I feel that all the traditional values must be re-examined with a modern mentality in the context of our times. Without getting involved with the sentimental past, I should exploit the cultural matrix for a
profitable present and future. There is an urge in me to share my inner experience with others. I talk to you through my stories.
# APPENDIX - II: A LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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### APPENDIX - III: A SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION OF TAMIL

#### VOWELS

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#### CONSONANTS

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