Daughters of Glass and Colour

More Than Mere Ornamentation: Identity Found in a Circle of Light

By **Kaushigai Vasu**

In Brickfields, the jewellery shops stay open to the public on Saturday evenings. Their windows are lit even after the grocery shutters have been pulled down and the spice stalls have gone quiet, fluorescent light flowing out like milk onto the street, showing the walls decorated with **glass bangles**. Colours such as green as deep as *tulsi leaves*, reds as warm as *vermillion*, purples with the *quiet self-confidence of royal silk*, and metallics that tease like a prankster. They stand in beautiful columns, like a small cosmos, meticulously arranged by hand.

Right in the middle of the conversation of aunts discussing shades of maroon and the sound of bangles softly clinking as they are being tried on, I once again, almost affectionately realise which piece of jewellery has always been my **most genuine reflection**.

It's not the *jhumkas* that tinkle like bells with every movement of the woman's head.
It's not the fragrant jasmine braid whose smell goes ahead of her like a favour.
It's not the *mango malaai* which has the burden of ancestry and the power of ritual.

For me, however, it has been the bangles all the time, **meekly**, **defiantly**.

There is an air of simplicity about them, something that can be quite easily ignored until the very instant you see them really. They are not a stunning piece; they are the pulse. In Malaysian South Indian communities, where I grew up, they were all around and consequently hard to miss, on women rushing through the morning market, on girls riding bicycles to school, and on ladies serving sambal at temple feasts. They were so thoroughly integrated into everyday life that only maturity taught me to recognise the pattern.

Of all other ornaments, bangles are the ones that **constantly move with a woman**.
They are the ones who give the woman the **rhythm**.
They are the ones who know the woman the best.

They are the ones who only **sing along when the woman does**.

Their music is never overwhelming; it is a vivid, lean sound, the **fine percussion of a life that is being lived**. A *timid click* when she reaches for the keys, *soft shine* when she ties her hair, a *tiny choir* when she takes groceries upstairs. It marks her duties, her little pleasures, her secret habits.

That sound was part of my childhood, like a **heartbeat deep in the background**, unspoken but vital. My grandmother's bangles made soft clicks as she passed through the prayer room, every gesture infused with silence and respect. My mother had a different kind of rhythm, a *ringing sound full of confidence* that followed along her hands as she taught a rhythm that I was silently longing to grow into. And at family reunions, the whole house was alive with the combined ringing of glasses and metal, a soft music of **women in motion** who were occupying the silence of talks with their bright and familiar sound.

When I was a young girl, I never considered them to be anything significant. They were just pieces of jewellery that I could wear without being overdressed. I took them with me to school, to see a movie, to Mid Valley on a Sunday afternoon, picking colours by the way I was feeling, just like choosing the mood. They were my way of getting connected to something older than me and **still not feeling caught in it**.

Only much later, slowly but surely, did I come to understand during the process of growing up.

Bangles are our **most democratic ornaments**. They are the ones that could never be more equal in a way, and this they could never be more beautiful. They simply accompany the wearer and live *lightly on the wrist*. Yet they hold the **history of mankind** in their slender circles.

When I put them on now, there is a very soft backward pulling sensation on the form of a thread leading towards those women whose tales I know and even more the women of the past whose stories were **never told**. Women who first came to Malaysia carried almost nothing but **willpower**. Women who created families, communities, and futures, who were engaged in long hours of labour and at the same time reserved a place for **beauty on their wrists**.

Through my bangles' glass metal lacquer sheen, I behold their elusiveness. I listen to their music and hear their steps. Not loud. Not showy. Not demanding to be remembered. But **steady**. **Persistent**. **Alive**.

That, I come to understand, is the reason why bangles represent **me**.

They represent a type of femininity that is **more about music than shows**.
Gentle yet **not brittle**.
Hushed but **never out of sight**.
A being that night was not very loud, but actually, quite the opposite; it is a **source of life to the room**.

Bangles do not speak your story; instead, they are like the singer who **sings along as you write your story**.

And in Brickfields, where the past and the present have fused in a very charming way, the sound of their ringing, which has become so familiar to me, still follows me like a shadow. It is a signal that identity is not always the product of big and beautiful heirlooms or strikingly dramatic ornaments. At times, it is the **common thing that has carved the form of your movement and has learned the whole of life**.

To me, that thing had always been the bangle, a very plain, **unchanging circle** that goes along with me, enlarging, shining, and **transforming with me**.

A Devotion in Every Note

The Music Woke a Memory, Opened the Heart, and Recalled That One Was Held

By **Kaushigai Vasu**

I didn't get to know love with words, but rather with **sound**.

In temples, the noise of devotion does not proclaim itself; it comes in unannounced, *vibrating through the quietness of the stone* and with the help of the flames, the bells and the breath of the worshipers.

The first time I became aware of it, I was directing my feet on the **cold floor** that had been polished to smoothness by the hands of the devotees over the ages. The burning of incense made the air very thick so that breathing was like doing a *conscious act*, and the jasmine smelled like a **very light caress** on the skin that did not want to be defined.

Then something opened not all at once, not in a dramatic manner, but with the **certainty of a door** that was meant to be opened all along.

Prayer is initially a mere whisper, but with each repetition, it gradually becomes stronger. The **nadaswaram** slowly ascends, *neither happy nor sad but very human* and thus communicating both longing and homage through its voice. The sound goes through brightness and darkness, through pillars that have been darkened by ages, and it finds a place in the heart where it seems to belong.

When the bells are sounded **clear, uninterrupted, and precise**, their ring goes into the person and takes its place together with the heartbeat. For a second, *sound and the individual become one*. This is not music that is meant to win the audience's favour; it is music that is meant to **embrace**.

To put it another way, the temple on festival mornings becomes **larger than life**. The ringing of bells is continuous, silk touches the skin, and flowers look like they are *radiating light* rather than just opening up.

The group of men, women and kids, along with the mysterious strangers to them, are all united by a **transcending force** that doesn't need words. The human body is quicker to react than the brain to intervene. The breathing becomes deeper. The look in the eyes gets gentler. There is a **silent fullness** in the chest which feels both overpowering and totally natural at the same time.

The coming of joy is not through excitement but rather through **recognition**.

At this point of acknowledgement, sound is no longer merely sound. It becomes a **soft friend**, a friend who does not silence but still is, calm and watchful. The bell does not ask who hears, nor does the song of praise's volume indicate faith; they just go on, making the heart *comfortable with their company*. What is experienced is not uncovering but **comfort**, a feeling that nothing crucial has been absent ever, just waiting to be listened to.

The power of these sounds is not in their loudness or intricacy but rather in their **steadiness**. They are not to be hurried. They are not to be imposed. They take up the amount of space assigned to them, and while doing so, they *allow everything else to settle*.

One single bell can **release the tension** that has been unconsciously carried. One known hymn can make a day that is uncertain or adrift feel stable. It is a love that does not seek to explain or to be reciprocated. It *stays in the places that hurt*, but does so with great patience.

Anyone who has been in connection with the **divine vibration** understands this without needing any explanation. Each one of us has our bells, mantras, and music that can find us easily without any difficulty.

These sounds go beyond the realm of language and faith, and they serve as a reminder that love can be given even to **unworthy** ones, just as it is not necessary to *earn the right to belong*. We have this "language" of love even before we learn how to say it.

To experience this, **just close your eyes and listen**. The sound of the bell can be heard cutting through the air. The sound of the chanting becomes louder and then disappears. The sound of the nadaswaram comes up and stays there. The heat from the lamps, the fragrance of the jasmine, the stillness of the people nearby, everything is *felt by the body*, and then it goes to the heart. At that time, **nothing very important felt to be lacking**. The heart recalls something it has always been aware of.

In this listening, there is also a certain **quiet humility** and a readiness to be there without any demands at all. Time is not so strict in these moments; the past and future become very faint, and the focus is solely on *what is happening*. There is no need to make things better or to move on. Just being there is already a lot, and that **"a lot"** feels whole.

At times, **just one note** can open up the heart as nothing else can. It hits the empty spots we have kept inside, the sorrow we thought we had buried, the affection we were unaware of and thought we were missing. And in that breaking, there is no despair, only a **fierce, tender recognition** that we have always been carried, always been held, even in the moments we believed we were utterly alone. The chest tenses up, breathing slows down, and the spirit knows, with a weight it cannot label, that it has **always been enough**.

This is the devotion I return to not as memory, but as **presence**. A music that does not ask to be followed, only heard. It collects what is thrown around, balances what is unsteady, and gives a **kindness** that is so silent and full that it feels less like having something new given and more like having *something real reminded*.

And when it comes to us, as it always does, it teaches the heart once again the way to **open**, to become softer, and to **love**.

Does the Art Choose You, or Do You Choose the Art?

A love letter to Carnatic music and its breathing ragas, and to love that changes who you are.

By **Kaushigai Vasu**

The question did not arrive gently. It did not knock or wait at the edge of thought. It rose in me like a *raga* unfolding in an *alapana*, slow and certain, already whole even as it became.

I sat in a hall filled with anticipation. Jasmine scented the air, and a quiet tension shimmered through it. A young dancer began her **arangetram**.

Silk flowed like water with each turn. Her ankle bells marked rhythm with a clarity that felt almost sacred. Between her stillness and her motion, something in me shifted. Not loudly. Not visibly. But deeply, like being seen from the inside out.

It was not her perfection that moved me. **It was the moment perfection stopped mattering.**

There is always a point in such performances where training reaches its edge and technique can no longer hold what the artist is trying to express. Then something else takes over. Less practised, less contained, but more alive.

Her eyes softened. Her movements loosened. She was no longer dancing to the music; she was *inside* it.

And in that moment, the question came, not as thought but as something felt: **do we choose the art, or does the art choose us?**

I have never been able to find a clean beginning to **Carnatic music** in my life, because it did not begin as a choice. It was already there, already moving through the air I grew up in. Before I understood structure or learning, there was a sound that felt like belonging without explanation.

It began in temple spaces that felt less like places and more like continuations of home. In **Thevaram** carried through the morning air. In my mother's voice guiding mine long before I knew what I was holding.

It lived in small rituals that were never named as learning, only as presence. Music was not introduced to me as something separate from life. It was how *life already sounded*.

Later, when **Sangeetham** entered my life more formally, it did not replace anything. It only gave structure to what had already taken root. What I was being taught outside had already been forming within me for years. I did not enter music. It had already entered me.

That is the quiet truth of **Carnatic music**. It does not announce itself. It settles. And only much later do you realise it has become *part of your breathing*.

My earliest memories of it are not grand. They are almost invisible unless you are paying attention. A *kriti* drifting softly through a room while light moves across its surfaces. Fragments of *ragas*, hummed without intention. Rhythms slipping into awareness before I had any understanding of their name or shape.

And slowly, without warning, those fragments learned how to stay.

A phrase would return when everything else was silent. A raga would linger long after it had ended. What was once background began to become a presence. And presence, slowly, became a necessity.

I did not choose to love Carnatic music in a single moment.

I realised one day that it had already become the way I experience silence.

To speak of Carnatic music is to speak of *ragas* not as structures, but as living emotional spaces. Not simply melodies, but ways of feeling that resist translation, always shedding something essential the moment they are explained.

Kalyani does not just sound bright. It feels like something opening inside you that you did not know was closed.

Karaharapriya does not simply express emotion. It becomes a space where longing and calm exist at the same time without conflict.

Bhairavi does not enter or leave. It settles, as if it recognises something in you that existed before understanding.

And the more you live with them, the more you realise they are not outside you at all. They begin to feel like something already familiar, something you are slowly remembering rather than learning.

I have felt this most clearly in my own singing. There are moments when I begin carefully, holding onto everything I have been taught, trying to stay in control. But **Carnatic music** does not stay within control for long. Somewhere along the way, something shifts. The need to manage every note softens. A phrase appears that I did not plan. Another follows before I can hesitate.

And then I am no longer shaping the *raga*.

That moment is not dramatic. It is not loud. It is almost unsettling in how gentle it is. **A surrender without loss. Letting go without falling.** A crossing into something larger that had been waiting, quietly, for me to stop resisting it.

I am *inside* it.

And it is moving *through me*, not around me.

Watching that **arangetram**, I recognised the same surrender unfolding in front of me. Not as performance, not as display, but as trust. Trust in repetition. Trust in memory. Trust in something so deeply practised it has become instinct. There is a point where discipline stops being visible and becomes something deeper, something you can only feel rather than name.

Carnatic music is often spoken of in terms of discipline, and it indeed demands everything from you. Time, patience, repetition, humility. There are days when practice feels endless, when progress feels

invisible, when your own voice feels far away from you. Moments when you wonder if you are moving at all.

And yet, even then, it does not feel like something you can leave behind.

Because it is not something you carry.

It is something that begins to carry you.

And that is the difference, you only understand after time has softened it into truth.

There is also love in this, though it is not always the gentle kind. It is the kind that calls you back even when you are tired. The kind that makes repetition feel like meaning rather than weight. The kind that teaches you to sit with yourself without looking away.

And slowly, without noticing the moment it happens, music stops being something you *do*. It becomes something you are in a **relationship** with.

As someone growing up in **Malaysia** while carrying **South Indian** roots, that relationship has always felt layered. There is distance in geography, but not in feeling. Carnatic music does not erase that distance. It *dissolves* the need for it to matter. It creates belonging without asking for explanation.

The *kriti* becomes more than a composition. It becomes **continuity**. It carries devotion, language, history, and emotion in a way that feels alive in the present tense. When I sing it, I do not feel like I am reaching back into something distant. I feel like I am stepping into something still unfolding.

So when I return to the question, I no longer hear it as something that demands an answer.

Do we choose the art, or does the art choose us?

It feels more intertwined than either option allows.

We choose to stay. We choose to return. We choose to practice even when it is difficult. That is real, and it matters. But there is another truth, quieter but just as real. We do not choose what stays with us in the way

music stays. We do not choose how certain sounds become memories. We do not choose how something becomes home before we understand why.

It recognises something in us, and we recognise something in it, and once that **recognition** happens, it does not separate cleanly again.

That is what I saw in her on stage: not just a dancer, not just a performance, but a moment where something human allowed itself to be shaped by something larger, without resistance, without fear, as if **surrender itself had learned grace**.

And I understood then what **Carnatic music** does when it truly enters a life. It does not remain outside you as an art form. It becomes *a way of being inside yourself*. It teaches you to listen without rushing, to let silence complete what sound begins, to feel without reaching too quickly for names, to return without needing permission from the world or from your own hesitation.

And if you stay long enough with it, something in you begins to change shape without force. Not suddenly. Not loudly. But completely, like something patient finally remembering how to become itself.

Like a melody that gets bigger but stays the same,
like a quiet devotion that goes beyond words,
like a river that keeps flowing but never forgets where it came from.

Like a heart learning, quietly and endlessly, that it does not have to close to protect itself, only open, and keep opening, even when opening feels like the most vulnerable thing it can do.

Until there is no longer a line between you and the music at all.

Only continuation. Only breath shaped into sound. Only silence that still carries melody inside it. Only becoming that never asks to be finished.

And in that becoming, I understand what I could not name before. I did not simply enter Carnatic music. **It had already entered me**, softly, completely, as if it had been waiting for the right moment in my life to finally be recognised.

And we have been unfolding together ever since, not as two separate things meeting, but as something slowly remembering that it was never separate at all.

So I no longer return to the question expecting it to resolve itself into certainty. *Do I choose the art, or does the art choose me?*

In the beginning, it felt necessary to separate the two, as if meaning depended on drawing a clear line. But over time, the line stopped holding.

What remains is simpler than an answer.

I chose to stay.

And it chose to remain.

And in that quiet agreement, the question loses its urgency, not because it is solved, but because it no longer needs to be asked.

That is where it ends.

Saathiram Yedhukkadi, Kannammaa?

On the life we follow, and the self we forget.

By **Kaushigai Vasu**

For most of us, life just... happens.

We wake up, get ready, go to work or school, answer messages, meet deadlines, and before we know it, the day is over. Then we do it all again the next morning. We keep telling ourselves that things will feel better once we get the job, finish the degree, make a little more money, or finally feel like we've got everything figured out. So we keep going, because that's what everyone else seems to be doing too.

Without even realising it, we start living by a script. We learn what's expected of us, what success is supposed to look like, and who we're supposed to become. After a while, we stop asking whether any of it is actually what we want. It's just the way life is.

But sometimes, usually in the quiet moments when there's nothing to distract us, a question shows up.

Is this really the life I'm living, or just the life I've been told to live?

It’s a strange feeling because nothing actually has to be wrong. Your life might be going well. You’re doing what you’re supposed to do, ticking all the right boxes, and from the outside, everything looks fine. But somehow, it still feels like something isn’t quite there. It’s hard to even explain it properly. Maybe it’s because you’ve spent so much time trying to become the person you thought you were supposed to be that you never really paused to ask who you already are.

Saathiram pesugiraai, Kannammaa / Saathiram yedhukkadi?

Why do we keep living by the same script? Why do we spend years trying so hard to live up to other people's expectations instead of asking what we actually want? Somewhere along the way, we start believing there is only one right way to live. Study hard. Get a good job. Be successful. Make people proud. We're told that if we follow that path, everything will work out. We'll be happy. We'll have enough. We'll finally be understood.

And then Bharatiyar asks a question that feels almost too simple:

Why do you speak of scriptures, Kannamma? Why?

It's a question that always finds its way back when everything gets quiet. Why are we so afraid of not having a clear answer? Why do we feel like we always need to know who we are or where we're going?

Maybe it's because the unknown scares us. So we fill our lives with "shoulds" and "musts." We tell ourselves we have to become someone, achieve something, stay on a certain path. At first it feels like structure, like it's helping us stay on track. But slowly it stops feeling like support and starts feeling like pressure instead, like it's closing in on you without you even realising it.

And the uncomfortable part is realising nobody actually put us there. We did it ourselves. Quietly. Over time. One choice at a time, one expectation at a time. And even then, we don't really step out, because the idea of stopping feels strange. Like if we're not chasing something, not proving something, not becoming someone, then what are we supposed to be? So we stay inside it. Not because it's good, but because it's familiar. And sometimes familiarity feels safer than freedom.

Aaththiram kondavarkkae kannammaa / Saathiram undoodi.

I think most of us are *aaththiram kondavarkkae* in some way. There's this constant restlessness in us, like we're always behind on something even when we're not. Always meant to be moving,

improving, becoming. Life starts to feel like a race we never really signed up for, and yet we keep running anyway, because slowing down feels unfamiliar, almost scary. And somewhere in that running, we forget there was never a clear finish line in the first place.

We're so busy trying to become someone that we forget we're already here, living. Maybe that's what this line is getting at. Scripture is for the person who's so desperate for certainty that they've forgotten how to exist simply. We've become so impatient for life to make sense that we miss it as it happens. We want guarantees before we take the next step, when maybe the whole point was never to have one. Maybe the point was just to keep walking and let life unfold as it does.

There’s another way to live in this world, and it feels a lot quieter than what we’re used to. Almost like stepping into a temple after being outside in all the noise and rush. Inside, things don’t demand anything from you. You just… slow down without thinking about it.

There’s something old in that silence. Not heavily or religiously, just something steady that doesn’t need to be explained. It’s not something you learn from a book or pick up from advice. It’s more like something you remember without knowing where you learned it from. Something you carry. A way of being that stays with you even when everything around you is trying to make you different.

And then there’s this one shift that sounds simple, but it’s not:

You must be the love you want to see in the world.

It’s not big or dramatic. It’s really just how you choose to show up on a normal day. When you’re tired. When your mind is full. When life feels like it’s asking too much from you and you still try not to become cold because of it.

It’s choosing softness when hardness would be easier. It’s looking at people and actually seeing them, not as obstacles or competition, but just… other people who are also trying to get through things. Just like you.

And sometimes it’s as simple as walking into a room that feels a bit cold and not letting it change you. You don’t force warmth, you don’t perform it, you just don’t let yourself shut down either. You stay a little open. A little kind. In your own quiet way.

Not perfect. Just human.

It is the *kannaththu muththam*, the kiss on the cheek.

There’s something about a kiss on the cheek that feels different. It’s gentle. It doesn’t ask for attention or expect anything back. It’s just a quiet way of saying, *I'm here. I see you.*

I wonder how often we forget to offer that same kindness to ourselves.

Most of the time, we only look at ourselves through what still needs to be done. The deadlines, the expectations, the mistakes, the endless feeling that we should be doing more. Somewhere in all that noise, we stop seeing ourselves as people. We become projects that always need fixing.

Maybe the love we've been waiting for was never completely outside of us. Maybe it begins with the way we speak to ourselves after a bad day. The way we forgive ourselves for not having everything figured out. The way we choose, over and over again, not to abandon ourselves.

The heart was never meant to be a place where we're constantly putting ourselves on trial. It was meant to feel like home. And maybe that's what carrying the memory of jasmine or an old melody is really about. Not clinging to the past, but holding on to the parts of yourself that remind you who you are when the world starts asking you to be someone else.

I think that's what tenderness really looks like. It's noticing your friend's laugh when they're trying to hide how tired they are. It's smiling back at a stranger who's caught in the same rain as you. It's remembering that everyone you meet is carrying something you can't see.

None of this is easy. Staying soft can hurt. It means you'll care a little more than most people. It means some goodbyes will stay with you longer than you'd like. It means your heart won't always have the luxury of pretending not to feel.

But maybe that's okay.

Maybe the fact that your heart still breaks a little is proof that it still knows how to love. That after everything life has asked of you, after all the ways the world has tried to make you harder, there’s still a part of you that just refuses to stop feeling things.

And maybe that's something worth protecting.

Saathiram undoodi.

The rules will always be there. They help the world function, and that's okay. We need them. But they were never meant to tell us how to love, how to care, or how to live. They can organise our work, our schedules, and our responsibilities, but they can't tell us what kind of heart we should have.

I don't think kindness needs an audience. It doesn't need to be seen to be real. Some of the most meaningful things we do will probably never be noticed by anyone else. And maybe that's the point. It's enough to know that you were patient when you could've been impatient. That you chose understanding over judgment. That you left people feeling a little lighter than you found them.

Life doesn't suddenly become simple when you decide to live this way. You'll still wake up to deadlines, responsibilities, and days where everything feels like too much. The world won't stop asking things from you. But little by little, those things stop becoming the centre of your life. You realise they're just part of living, not the reason you're here.

What people remember isn't how perfectly you followed every rule. They remember how you made them feel. They remember the friend who stayed on the phone a little longer. The teacher who believed in them. The stranger who smiled when they needed it most. Most of the time, love looks ordinary. It's found in the smallest moments.

Maybe that's enough.

Maybe we don't have to spend our whole lives trying to become extraordinary. Maybe it's enough to be someone who makes life feel a little gentler for the people around them.

So don't apologise for being soft. Don't apologise for caring deeply or for believing that kindness still matters. The world might tell you that you have to be tougher to survive, but I don't think softness and strength have ever been opposites.

When the day is over, and everything finally becomes quiet, I hope you can come home to yourself. I hope you can look back and think, *"I did my best. I loved where I could. I stayed true to myself."*

At the end of it all, maybe that's what really matters. Not that you had all the answers. Not that you got everything right. Just that you never stopped being human.