

# Why everyone should read more of Malayalam writer Rajelakshmy's groundbreaking fiction

The Malayalam writer, who killed herself at just 35, is acknowledged as one of the creators of post-colonial prose modernism.

by [Nikhil Govind](#)

Published Jul 30, 2017 · 05:30 pm



*A Path and Many Shadows & Twelve Stories* is a collection of short stories and a novel by noted Malayalam writer Rajelakshmy. Rajelakshmy (1930-65) was amongst the early generation of important writers from Kerala, and the first woman novelist to win the Kerala Sahitya Akademy award in 1960. The novel was actually published two years before that, which meant Rajelakshmy had already written a remarkable novel by the age of 28, bearing comparison to the precociousness of an Ismat Chughtai or a Qurratulain Hyder.

Rajelakshmy's work was also widely performed on radio and television, and invoked a strong, subtle consciousness of the strains of family life and female adulthood. She explored a wide variety of genres – novels, poetry, short stories – and was published in all the leading Malayalam literary journals of the 1960s. Her influence since those times has only grown and she is now acknowledged as one of the pioneers of post-colonial modernism in prose in India.

## **Beauty and tragedy**

But the achievement and intensity of her work reflected a difficult, perhaps even tragic life – she committed suicide in 1965, at the age of just 35. This has become part of her legend. It may be noted that someone from another continent, who shared so many of Rajelakshmy’s concerns, and who lived an almost exactly contemporaneous life to hers – Sylvia Plath – was to die by her own hand in 1963 at the age of 31. Rajelakshmy has also been compared in her “spiritual isolation” to Virginia Woolf, another famous case of self-annihilation. The debt to Woolf has been acknowledged by Rajelakshmy, and good cultural criticism must thoughtfully bring out the inner mechanics of this debt.

The short stories collected here reveal that a worm is already eating away at the kingdom of social realism, the dominant form of literature by the 1930s, all over India. In Kerala, with its oscillation from an extremely caste-conscious region followed by the swing of the pendulum to a rule by an elected Communist party, the pressure of a Left-leaning social realism was felt particularly keenly.

## **The professional woman**

Though in many ways all over the world realism still rules as the preferred mode of prose, in Rajelakshmy one can see the many ways it is being constantly undermined and refined. She was already exceptional for her time – as someone with an advanced degree in Physics from Benares Hindu University, and a teacher, she was already occupying spaces that called for a newer protagonist: the working woman. And yet the pressure of familial tradition weighs heavy on her, for a tradition cannot be as easily discarded as tearing a cheque.

There are many stories of the tensions of professional life – to retain self-confidence and courage in the male-majority workplace (*The Apology*, *The Defeated One*), the guilt of seeing friends and family trapped in wifedom and being able to do little about it (*Suicide*), the sense of loss that careers and adult responsibilities create within sibling relationships (*Handkerchief*). The art of the stories is not to polemicise, but to show the strain of gender through elliptical narrative, rapid shifts of perspective, sharp and piercing colloquialism.

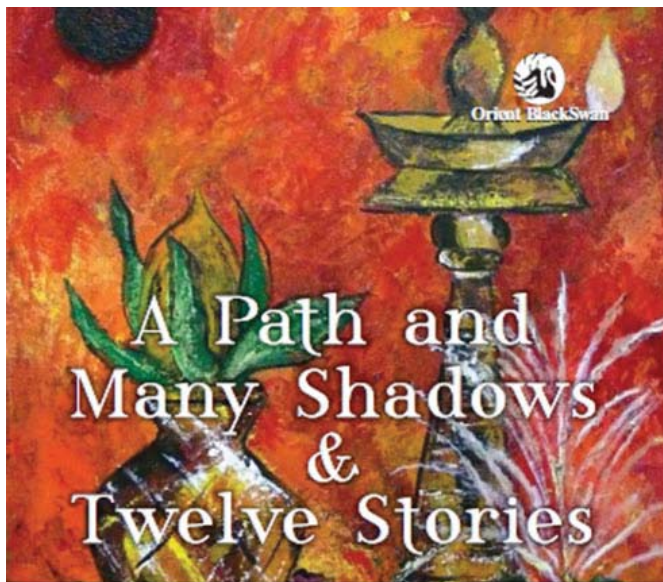
The novel *A Path and Many Shadows*, for which she won the Akademi award, is extraordinary for several reasons. The novel is a continuous web of subtly shifting standpoints, some of it enabled by the very grammar of Malayalam, as the translator notes. But form is not an end in itself, nor is the novel too quickly self-congratulatory on its formal inventiveness. Rather, there is a slow unspooling of realism. The flesh of the narrative is the dream-world of the child-protagonist, and the use of a child/young-person perspective allows fleeting but tangible, astringent slivers of perception. In those series of perceptions run the crescendos and diminuendos of puberty and early womanhood.

Though a novel seemingly concerned with choosing life-partners, the power lies less in this romance-lineage than in the realism slowed to a simmering boil. This slowness and leisure creates a unique nerve-thread of perceptions that courses through the protagonist's sense of her fate and her environs. As the introduction by literary scholar PP Reveendran notes, there is much similarity to her slightly younger contemporary, Jnanpith awardee MT Vasudevan Nair, who, too, worked with lyric, adolescent perception.

## **Decline of the feudal hold**

That the strength of the novel lies in this plethora of minute observations should force us to reconsider the cliché that many “dominant caste-novels” (which includes the oeuvre of MT Vasudevan Nair) are all based on the idea of the “decline of the feudal household”. This idea has a pan-Indian resonance. For example, this same historical moment in 1962 also contained the hit film *Sahib, Bibi, aur Ghulam*, based on Bimal Mitra's Bengali novel, presumably also based on feudal decline.

But these novels and films do not speak of the decline of a rural landholding elite in simple binary terms of mourning or celebration. Indeed, the rhetoric of decline is both cause of effect of family scandal (in both Mitra and Rajelakshmy), and this scandal allows new gender roles and affirmations to flourish. It is in seeing the suffering of the older, more conservative order of women that the new protagonists are unyielding about taking their fate in their own hands. The use of such a context is also to explore the growing up of a sensitive, restless protagonist, one who deeply absorbs and ponders, who needs silence, hesitancy and inwardness, and only then returns to the outer world to choose her path to “walk on” (the last words of the novel).



RAJELAKSHMY

Translated from the original Malayalam  
by R. K. Jayasree



Lastly, it is refreshing to see the work encircled by scholarship (such as the introduction by Raveendran, and a translator's note by RK Jayasree, who translates both from and into Malayalam. The literary and cultural contexts sketched in this scholarship are essential for any reader to begin to grasp the vanished world of the northern Kerala of 50 years ago. It is also welcome that Ezhuthachan Malayalam University has taken such initiative in this project, which is rather rare in a time of universities growing ever more indifferent to serious Indian cultural and literary scholarship.

***A Path and Many Shadows & Twelve Stories, Rajelakshmy, translated by RK Jayasree, Orient BlackSwan***