

Diary of a lone writer

A new volume of English translations of R Chudamani's Tamil short-stories explores people and the human mind in her trademark subtle-yet-probing way

Tamil writer R Chudamani's stories about people, human emotions, relationships, and the often unconventional workings of the mind, form the crux of the recently-launched *The Solitary Sprout: Selected Stories of R Chudamani* (Orient Black-Swan). Released by R Chudamani Memorial Trust, the collection has short stories translated from Tamil by CT Indra and T Sriraman. The translators, who worked on 10 stories each for the volume, talk about what drew them to the writer and why her stories stand the test of time:

CT Indra, retired professor and head, Department of English, University of Madras
Chudamani's writing is often considered to be from the middle-class, Brahminical milieu. It certainly is, but her perceptions are startling; they trouble you as a reader. She challenged institutions in a subtle, yet, probing way; she never demonised them. In a story I translated, she writes about a step-father. Now perhaps, this relationship is not such a uncommon subject of discussion; but to think that she wrote about this 25 years ago!

It is about a young mother who remarries; her little boy has to come to trust his step-father, which he eventually does. Through it, Chudamani asks questions such as 'Doesn't a woman have the



Words, her world Chudamani was solitary, but was not alienated • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

right to her sexuality?' in a sensitive and delicate way. I titled the short story *Not A Stepfather* hinting at the possibility of something more in the relationship.

In *A Chair and a Death*, she addresses class divide. The story is about how an elderly woman offers a folding chair to her maid's son, asking him to sit on it. The woman's liberal attitude, and that she sees the possibility of a new social order, results

in stiff opposition from her family.

There's another highly lyrical story in the collection about a man who has a paramour. The narrative is in the form of monologues that he has in his head. Chudamani's unconventional explorations result in moments of epiphany for the reader – this is an achievement that places her on a par with world-class masters of short-stories.

My direct interaction with

her was limited to a phone conversation we had. I remember her frail voice when I spoke to her with regard to the translation of her Tamil short-story *Senthuru Aagivital*; it was to be part of a volume on Tamil women writers' short fiction I planned to bring out. When I sent her my translation, she was quick to edit and send it back. She changed the title to 'Herself' from 'She became Senthuru', in keeping with the spirit of the story.

T Sriraman, retired professor, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad
Chudamani's sympathy towards all kinds of people shines through in her stories. She wrote about a whole range of characters – her sto-

ries are also about growth and the evolution of these characters, with the possibilities of their transformation. In a story titled *This is More Important*, she writes about the relationship between a stepmother and her stepson. There's always a thin divide between them – when he asks her to accompany him to meet the family of the girl he plans to marry, she initially refuses. But she finally decides to go with him, thinking that she owes this to her husband. You will not find any flag-waving pronouncements, punch-lines or catch-phrases in Chudamani's fiction but often gently ironic or delicately satirical portrayal of our individual and social selves.

In *The Young Adult*, she discusses problems of adolescence. A young boy falls in love with his tuition teacher. There's a burst of energy in him and he keeps talking about her to his mother. He tells her things like 'Teacher was wearing a nice sari today'. She gets married one day and the boy cannot take it. But his mother is there for him; she understands that this is all part of his growing up. What drew Chudamani to me is that she firmly establishes herself as a humanitarian; there's a stamp of humanity in all her stories. She lived like a recluse; she was solitary, but was not alienated.

(As told to

Akila Kannadasan)

