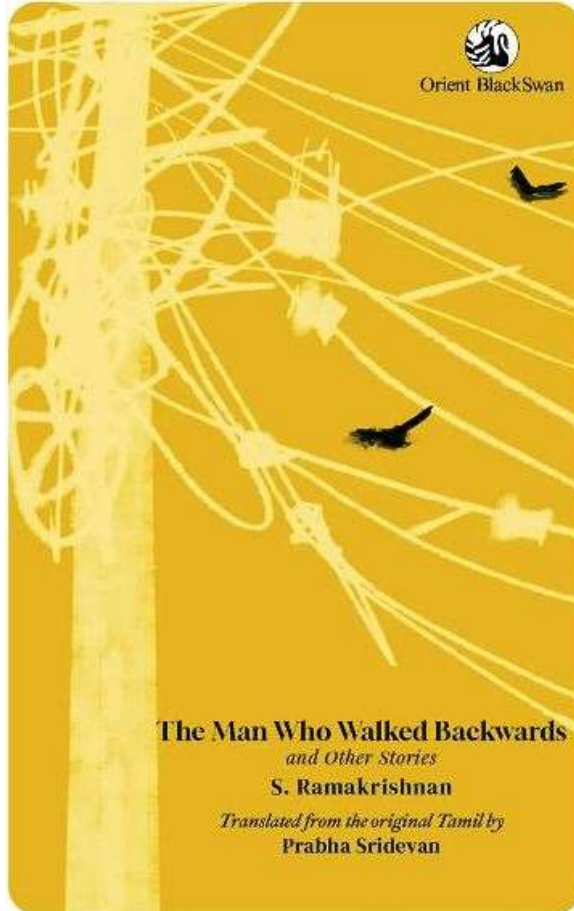


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The Man Who Walked Backwards and Other Stories, by S. Ramakrishnan.

Translated from the original Tamil by Prabha Sridevan. Published by Orient Black Swan

Review by Aparna Karthikeyan



If I had a chance to meet one character from any of the books I read, I'd pick Thekkan. He is No Ordinary Thief, as the title tells us upfront. He is a savant. But not the way you'd imagine. He can communicate with dogs and trees. And befriends and heals them. But his extraordinary gift becomes a great burden when he reads the oppressive future of young girls. He's torn and tormented, and what he decides to do with - and about - his superpower elevates the story.

Thekkan's is one of the 18 stories, spread over 181 pages, spanning four continents and at least three generations, and the most unexpected set of people within the covers of any book. That's my one-line summary of S. Ramakrishnan's brilliant short story collection, *The Man Who Walked Backwards*, translated beautifully into English by Prabha Sridevan.

Gandhi and Gautama; the man who built a house with a hundred windows, the clerk who counted pigeons; the woman who swam, the one who ran away; and the one who imagined a family for herself and washed real clothes for the husband and children who existed only in her mind, all because her father kept pointing out she was already 34... Ramakrishnan sets a tall mandate for himself - to write about the inner lives of women. 'As a creator' he tells us in his note, 'I want to understand her and people like her in whose hearts lies a universal love fashioning a sea, a mountain, a waterfall and a forest - all within themselves. It is them that I write about.'

It is that inner world that is captivating, in story after story. And nowhere is it as powerful as the one where Susila, the heroine who had her hand broken for going In Search of Gandhi. She is a young bride, with a husband who loved - no, lusted - for her body. Her mind does not interest him. Did he even know she has a fertile one? He only cares about her womb. When she takes off to Wardha, to meet Gandhi, he is furious. And in this poignant story, layered with meaning, Ramakrishnan foregrounds the freedom struggle - within Susila, within the country - and places it along the salt country. The personal and political come together in Marakannam, Tuticorin and then, fittingly, Vedaranyam, the heart of the Satyagraha in the south, from where Susila departs. Her search takes her to a different country, from where her son begins his.

In the Rain Dairy, it is the deluge that unites a father and son. Travelling from Madurai to Seattle - where the rain is masculine and virile - it is an outward and inward journey, the gauge measuring not just the precipitation, but also intimacy. Ramakrishnan makes excellent use of objects - whether it is a rain gauge, a pair of dolls or a lock of hair (and the dramatic and chilling backstory of that clump), taking the everyday and the ordinary

and infuses it with magic. Nothing is more ordinary than, perhaps, the much-derided pigeons. In Ramakrishnan's story, they fly into the soul of a government office clerk. Without this little eccentricity, he is just one more cog in a gigantic wheel, doing the same job for over thirty years, until "unbeknownst to them, their face, body and actions are slowly transformed, and increasingly come to resemble those old government office desks." It's a devastating description - implying a stodgy life, too heavy to move. But then, Ramakrishnan contrasts it with an unbearable lightness, filling the scenes with feathers and wings, until it's tempting to look out of the window, and count pigeons...

Many of Ramakrishnan's stories are filled with movement. Walking backwards and swimming are the obvious ones. But quickly, he goes beyond the physical and restless movements. Much of it happens on the inside. Characters change, evolve and mature; there is a quiet resignation in some, and a quiet acceptance in others. Aren't they similar, you might wonder. Ramakrishnan shows you how they are different, and that fine line that divides the two emotions is where women live.

Like the heroine in Amma's last swim. The mother - we learn her name is Rukmani only when her husband hurls the word across the water, until then she is just Amma - swims away her anger and frustration. The water does not trap her; marriage does. Her last swim is the longest. And one that fills the protagonist - her child - with terror for years. When the family leaves the village, she loses her coping mechanism, her private therapy sessions, if you will. And she remains 'inscrutable, half-known, half-unknown... like those dark waters.'

The highpoint of this collection is, within the short span of each story, the reader gets to know the characters. And feel a great love, hate, anger... and a great fear. In *The Smell of Kerosene*, Ramakrishnan builds the tension over nine pages, unpacking the anatomy of a caste conflict. Travelling from villages to towns, from forbidden islands to tea estates on a hill (where darkness is true and deep unlike in the city,

"where light kept leaking into the night like sunlight through an umbrella with holes"), he describes places and people with deft brush strokes.

Nowhere is his victory - and that of the elegant translation - greater than in the story of a poem. *Sitridazh*. "How lovely is this word, 'sitridazh'! Sounds like a wild flower. But *sitridazh* is really like a small brook." And it is in this story, which cleverly retains the original Tamil title, that his skill as a short story writer shines. Unfolding in a small room, where Rilke and Sangam poetry collide, Ramakrishnan serves deep uncomfortable truths with tea. "A family," he notes, "will accept a drunkard, but not a poet". "Tamil culture

has a heritage of two thousand years of poetry, but you cannot sell two thousand copies of a Tamil poet's book. That is the reality."

The joy of this collection is the beautiful translation. I read it in English, and in my head, I heard it in Tamil. Prabha Sridevan's language is perfectly in sync with the Tamil landscape, the lives of the speakers, and the cadence and rhythm of their speech. "I am a thief. I am like a thorn shrub myself. Maybe that is why I am able to sense the lives of other plants just by touching them." Similarly - as a judge earlier and now a translator - Prabha Sridevan too can sense the lives of other people. And bring them to life in another tongue.

"No one pays heed to their voices that weep silently," notes Ramakrishnan, in the author's note. "I take their side. I share their sorrows with the world. I argue their case before my readers."

He's won the case...with some help from a judge.