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Lavanyadevi: A Woman Between Worlds



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Kusum Khemani's Lavanyadevi, translated into English by Banibrata Mahanta, is a story about women, mothers, daughters, grandmothers and the ties that bind them across time, space, and social boundaries.

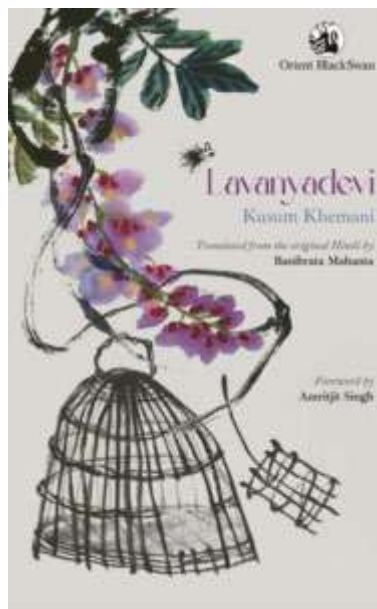


Representative image of an Indian woman. Photo: Flickr CC BY 2.0 ATTRIBUTION 2.0 GENERIC

Translation opens the world to us, as recently seen in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*. Translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, it became the first Hindi novel to win the International Booker Prize, a landmark moment not just for the book but for Hindi literature. Translation isn't merely about replacing words – it's about building bridges, connecting cultures, ideas, and experiences.

India is the land of languages, each carrying its own universe of stories, traditions, and wisdom. In this mosaic of languages, translation becomes not just a bridge but a lifeline, connecting diverse voices and preserving the soul of our collective heritage.

It allows a Tamil poet to resonate with a Punjabi reader, a Bangali novelist to touch hearts in Kerala, and a Maithili folk tale to inspire someone in Gujarat. Translation is the thread that weaves the fabric of our shared identity, enabling us to celebrate our differences while finding unity in our humanity. In a country as vast and diverse as India, translation is not just a necessity it's a celebration of who we are, a way to ensure that no story, no voice, no culture is ever lost in the cacophony of languages. It's how we listen to one another, how we understand, and how we grow together.



Lavanyadevi, Kusum Khemani, translated from the original Hindi by Banibrata Mahanta, Orient BlackSwan, 2024.

This is where Kusum Khemani's *Lavanyadevi* comes in. Translated into English by Banibrata Mahanta, it is an ambitious literary endeavour that chronicles the lives of five generations of a family. Originally written in Hindi, the novel transcends its linguistic roots by seamlessly connecting elements of Bengali and Rajasthani languages, creating an area of cultural and linguistic plurality.

Banibrata Mahanta's translation, honoured with the PEN/Heim Translation Grant 2021, brings out the essence of Khemani's prose with remarkable sensitivity, making the story as vivid and evocative in English as it is in its original form

Women at the centre: Relationships across time and space

At its heart, *Lavanyadevi* is a story about women, mothers, daughters, grandmothers and the ties that bind them across time, space, and social boundaries. The titular protagonist, Lavanyadevi, emerges as an enigmatic and compelling figure. She is both worldly and spiritual, grounded in her everyday struggles yet embodying ideals of grace and vision.

As a central character, Lavanyadevi, appears at first to be untouched by struggle. She is the only child of wealthy parents, highly intelligent, and married to a husband who provides her with immense wealth and unconditional support. However, as the story progresses, her inner conflicts and true struggles come to light. Her life, shaped by a commitment to action and a deep connection to indigenous spirituality, is an exploration of modernity's interface with tradition.

Cultural evolution and pluralism

Set against the backdrop of India's transition from colonial rule to contemporary times, the novel delves into the challenges of migration, displacement, and the evolving identities of the Marwari diaspora in Kolkata. The novel transitions seamlessly from personal stories to historical events. As a Kolkata Marwari herself, Khemani blurs the distinctions between 'Bengali' and 'Marwari,' crafting a narrative that celebrates a pluralistic and uniquely Indian ethos.

The comparison between Western and Indian lifestyles is another significant feature of the novel, which reveals the author's insightful perspective. Khemani addresses contemporary issues like marriage, sexual ethics, and the challenges of urban and corporate lifestyles with high sensitivity. We

find that the novel also highlights how women, even in modern times, impose self-restraints on natural behaviours like laughter, reflecting social pressures.

While reading the book, we naturally encounter how this novel is as much a chronicle of social, cultural, and personal change as it is an affirmation of enduring values rooted in shared humanism.

Balancing the personal and the political

We also discover that the true strength of *Lavanyadevi* lies in its seamless balance between the personal and the political. The story reflects on the dynamics of caste, culture, and faith, while also addressing broader questions of colonialism, modernity, and sustainable ways of living.

Kusum Khemani writes in the book:

“As soon as she heard these words, Mami’s face lit up with the joy of the fulfilment of a long-awaited wish. But Mama, like Khwaja Nasiruddin, finished his sentence thus, “but Suryabaladevi! I am always so worried about all of you. See, I can offer this bottle to the Supreme Almighty and, believe me I will not experience an iota of sorrow in doing so. But, what will happen to you after that?” Saying this he furrowed his brow as if in deep worry. Mami excitedly said, “What will happen to me? Arey! I will be overjoyed and offer a lot of prasad to the Lord!” “That is all fine. But listen carefully to what I have to say. See, I am like an insignificant clay doll. If I get drunk, I lie quietly in a corner. But if the Master of all the three universes gulps down the whole bottle and starts nodding off in a state of intoxication, what will happen to all of you? Every morning, you keep Him captive in your doe eyes.”

The novel intricately connects elements of college banter, the values of the freedom struggle, the determination and hesitations of a woman’s mind, and the nuanced similarities and differences between the cultures of Bangladesh and Calcutta. As I read, what stood out to me was its critique of majoritarian perspectives and its powerful advocacy for a more inclusive worldview, all embodied in Lavanyadevi’s enduring legacy of universal humanism.

Just as the purpose of human life is to transcend conflicts rather than be consumed by them, Lavanyadevi’s life too evolves from material achievements and fame to the ultimate realisation of merging with the earth, akin to the philosophical idea of ‘a broken pot whose water returns to the soil.’

This spiritual and detached outlook lends the novel to the depth. Through her life and choices, Lavanyadevi offers a model of progress that integrates the wisdom of the past with the aspirations of the future.

A linguistic and narrative marvel

Mahanta’s translation does more than bridge languages; it enriches the text by retaining the polyglot essence of the original. His translation brings out the tonalities of Indian traditions, from the cadence of folk tales to the philosophical undertones of sacred texts.

The enduring appeal of *Lavanyadevi*

We also find Khemani’s prose is energetic, her humor deadpan, and her control over the sprawling story impeccable. The novel is infused with twists and turns, and its fluid language in translation renders it deeply readable. It invites readers to explore new terrains of thought and experience, offering a journey that is as enlightening as it is entertaining.

This novel is not just a literary achievement but also a significant cultural document. It provides a granular picture of the Marwari community's evolution in a shape-shifting colonial and postcolonial India. I must add here that the novel *Lavanyadevi* doesn't just expose imbalances but strives to address them and seek improvement. The fluidity of its plot holds readers and keeps them engaged until the very end.

A landmark contribution to Indian literature

Khemani's *Lavanyadevi*, a rare example of exploration of identity, tradition, and change, is as relevant today as it was when first published. This work strikes a delicate balance between experiential truth and intellectual knowledge, offering a fresh perspective on the challenges of contemporary society. Whether you are drawn to the intergenerational dynamics, the cultural richness, or the philosophical depth, *Lavanyadevi* offers something enduring for every reader.

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