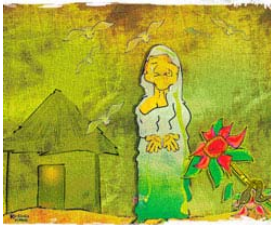


Soulful delights



In this collection of elegantly crafted stories, different in themes and style, the author has introduced a poetic sense to its narration, holding one's attention throughout, notes Tulsi Badrinath



Originally written in Tamil, this collection is special in that Lakshmi Kannan, the author, has herself translated the 17 stories into English. Nandanvan (a legendary garden) is a story animated by an almost Grecian chorus of birds who are fed everyday by Thatha, an old man, whose children are already quarrelling over how to apportion his property. In a

twist inspired by the Panchatantra perhaps, the outraged birds make Thatha their own when he dies, speeding away from his three avaricious sons.

Feisty servant Muniyakka performs shraadh for her dead husband, but also feels free to curse him and her three useless sons who have neglected their duty, leaving her to earn a day's meal through hard labour. Lakshmi skillfully conveys the sense of an old woman living in a hut, on the margins of a large house. The trees in the garden, signifying beauty and order to its owners, are an entirely different entity to Muniyakka. She reappears in *Because*, as a counterpoint to the women of the Brahmin household, where widows must shave their heads or forego an audience with an orthodox seer. The intelligent little girl Kalyani, through whom the story is narrated, negotiates her way through myths and fairy tales, where the light of her common sense falls upon their dark assumptions about women.

Bewildered by a world where her beloved aunt Pattu must stop playing the veena because she is a widow, sensing that part of her penance is self-chosen, Kalyani seeks refuge in the earthy presence of Muniyakka, who seems to belong to an alternate world where she can battle with devils and emerge victorious.

Snakes, metaphorical and mythical, form the basis of the story *Nagapushpam*, also a flower whose fragrance is said to attract snakes. Ahalya's prayers to the snake gods for a child have been granted, only they gave her a girl, named Nagaratna. Nagaratna grows up wondering how it is that the same snake feared in its live presence is deified in stone and worshipped for male progeny. The fragrance of the screw-pine becomes, ironically, the one perfume she can never associate with her gentle loving mother Ahalya.

In *Please, Dear God* and *A Sky All Around*, death is fought with the gentlest of weapons and prayer, with miraculous results. Lakshmi Kannan skillfully blends the auditory point of 'view' of a comatose patient in an ICU with his vivid astral travel across an ocean-like sky. In these stories, as in *Maze*, *Zeroing In*, *Savyasachi Square* and *A word with you, Father*, Lakshmi introduces male characters whom one can relate to, if not always like, such as the chauvinist in *Just Think About It*. Here, within the device of the dramatic monologue, the author simultaneously sketches a portrait of the wife — "she was so capable... she unnerved him" — and the brutish husband whose "hands itched to beat her up... to destroy her".

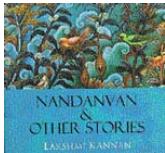
Lakshmi allows the two meanings of the word *Ejamaanar*, husband and boss, to direct her story to a gently subversive end. Gowri, the formidably efficient grandmother, runs her household well and offers good advice to the many women who seek it. Unlike them, she understands that her husband alone need not be the pivot of her life, and finds innocent but keen pleasure in hearing a relative's anecdotes. The narrator's own inhibitions are described with unselfconscious ease when Maria is deeply attracted to her.

While *The Red Heart of a Guava* seems more of an indulgence by the author of her love for a particular kind of guava than a short story, this collection of elegantly crafted stories, different in themes and style, holds one's attention throughout. The conclusions are never forced but arrive without any fuss at epiphanies. Telling details, such as the packet of beedis and the bottle of rum Muniyakka offers her dead husband, embellish these unusual stories.

Lakshmi Kannan's universe ranges from Kolkata to London to America to Bangalore, wherever the Tamil diaspora has spread. Lakshmi brings the sensibility of a poet to her stories, where the resolution sometimes is encapsulated in a single word or metaphor, such as the *pindas* rolled out by Time for

Simone de Beauvoir, ancestor to generations of feminists, or the use of the word savyasachi to describe the ambidextrous multi-talented old man in London. The translator in Lakshmi must be congratulated overall, for, the stories read well, except for an occasional blip in phrases such as “please don’t mistake me,” attributed to an American or the request to “keep vermilion” on a calf.

Adapting the quote from The Dhammapada at the beginning of Nandanvan, one may say that this book is “like the lotus softly fragrant and soul-delighting, rising clear... above the crowds.”



Nandanvan And Other Stories
Lakshmi Kannan

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