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ORU DESATHINTE KATHA ENTERS GLOBAL ARENA

Monday, 30 September 2013 | Kumar Chellappan | Chennai

Oru Desathinte Katha (The Story of a Locale), rated as Malayalee's window to the world and one of the five best Malayalam novels ever written, makes its entry into the global arena with an English translation.

Authored by Sankaran Kutty Pottekkatt (1913-1982), the work which was honoured with the Jnanpith Award in 1980 has been titled **Tales of Athiranippadam**, in memory of the fictional Athiranippadam, the name of the locale where he grew up as a tiny tot. Pottekkatt himself has described it as an autobiographical novel.

Though set up in Athiranippadam, the story takes the reader to Africa, Europe and Far East, making it the first ever inter-continental novel in Malayalam. Pottekkatt has incorporated hundreds of characters with whom he had interacted in his infancy, adolescence, youth and in the middle ages. The book also has a detailed reference to the First World War recounted by Kunjappau, the soldier who is also the elder brother of Sreedharan, the main protagonist.

What makes the novel unique is the number of characters whom one comes across in life, whether it be a village, country side or major city. Many of them possess different characteristics like enthusiasm in spreading gossips, rumours and country tales. "Had Pottekkatt translated this novel into English during his lifetime, he would have ended up as a strong contender for the Nobel Prize in literature," said P Rajan, former editor, Mathrubhumi, Kerala's leading Malayalam daily.

The Malayalam version of the book was published in the year 1971 sans any media blitzkrieg. "There was no television coverage or cocktail dinners in connection with the publication. Pottekkatt was a soft spoken and unassuming writer who shunned publicity," recollected Rajan.

The main challenge faced by writers, who tried to translate this novel in the past was the names and styles of the characters. "The novel has so many tales which the protagonist heard and learnt from his grand mother, parents and old family friends who had travelled extensively. One needs extra intelligence to describe some of the characters like Aandi, the document writer, Sankunni, the compounder who survive by cadging on others," said PK Rajasekharan, leading literary critic.

Translated by Sreedevi K Nair and Radhika P Menon, two Kerala-based professors in English, Tales of Athiranippadam was published as part of the SK Pottekkatt birth centenary year. Though there were moves by film makers and TV serial producers to make a film or serial out of this novel, none could succeed in making it a reality.

Rajasekharan describes the novel as Kerala's first ever tryst with romantic realism. "It is equivalent to any other classic novels like War and Peace or Gone With the Wind. I am sure Tales of Athiranippadam is the greatest literary event of 2013," he said. The translators have already bagged a major compliment from none other than Ronald Asher, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh who is an expert in Malayalam as well as English.