

BOOKS article

Breaking barriers

Six works of literary translation from Malayalam to English bear testimony to the potential of academic and creative collaborations in reshaping the publishing industry in India. BY **MEENA T. PILLAI**

WHAT do six books of translation from Malayalam, including stories, novels and memoirs, have in common that makes one wonder how subjective narratives make the substance of a culture? As the reader feels the quickening pulse of a vibrant Kerala and a mellifluous Malayalam, realisation dawns that probably the function of a committed academia is also to narrate the tales of a land to the other. Each one of these translations has been published on the initiative of the Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University and bears testimony to what academic and creative collaborations can do to reshape the future of the publishing industry in India. A political commitment to the art of translation, a passion for breaking regional barriers to reach global audiences and a deep-seated conviction that translation as a cultural practice ought not to remain on the margins of society, academia and critical debates, seem to be the motivating force behind this prolific exercise.



On the Far Side of Memory
Short Stories of Lalithambika Antharjanam

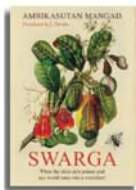
Translated by J. Devika

Oxford University Press

Pages: 174
Price: Rs.450



J. DEVIKA.



Swarga
Ambikasutan Mangad
Translated by J. Devika

Juggernaut

Pages: 247
Price: Rs.399

FEMINIST TRANSLATION

As the image of a woman who, after a day's harrowing domestic labour, wakes up to freedom at midnight through her writing unfolds before us, the story of Lalithambika Antharjanam and of women in the early decades of twentieth century Kerala, comes alive through J. Devika's evocative transla-



A Path and Many Shadows & Twelve Stories

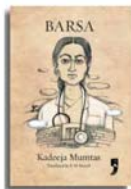
Rajelakshmy
Translated by R.K. Jayasree

Orient BlackSwan
Pages: 320
Price: Rs.575



R.K. JAYASREE.

tion *On the Far Side of Memory*. Definitely a feminist translation, this book breaks the mould of mainstream understandings of Lalithambika Antharjanam by seeking to not just read her as a writer of fiction but also contextualise her works as that of a first-generation feminist intellectual in Kerala who staunchly wrote gender into its reform and literary paradigms. A story like "Life and Death" embodies



Barsa

Kadeeja Mumtas
Translated by
K.M. Sherrif

Yoda Press

Pages: 213
Price: Rs.350



K.M. SHERRIF.

a widow's scream that reverberates across the corridors of history, in the process ripping away the mask of current trends that glorify such "traditions". A great pick of stories, many of them not discussed before, that make us question our present through a re-signified past.

RETRIEVING TRADITION

The collection of Rajelakshmy's stories is another step in this attempt to retrieve a female literary tradition and take a relook at early feminist interventions into social imagina-

tions of femininity in Kerala. This collection brings together 12 short stories and the novel *A Path and Many Shadows* by a writer who has always haunted readers in Kerala through her life, death and writings. For readers intrigued more by the teller than the tale, the book opens with a brilliant introduction by P.P. Raveendran which critiques the manner in which literary institutions have, through previews, advertisements and celebrity cultures, imbued tellers of tales with an aura that sometimes eclipses the tale or makes it incidental. R.K. Jayasree's translation is deeply sensitive to Rajelakshmy's brooding sense of alienation and her sombre creative agony. As story after story, from "Daughter" to "Suicide", reveals a dark world where women become yellowing wallpapers on patriarchal walls, the teller and her tales unite in a refusal to sunder art from life.

DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

Sivarga is a novel that is deeply archetypal in its connotations. Plumbing the depths of folklore and mythology, it reveals a world that has gone awry, rendered waste by human lust and avarice. Resonat-



Don't Want Caste

Malayalam stories by
Dalit writers

Edited by
M.R. Renukumar
Translated by
Abhirami Girja Sriram
and Ravi Shanker

Navayana

Pages: 192
Price: Rs.325



ABHIRAMI GIRIJA
SRIRAM.



RAVI SHANKER.

ing with contemporary epic struggles such as that against the insecticide endosulfan, the novel narrates the malady of a pestilence-stricken land and a corporate poison that would soon overrun the world, a world where animals and plants wilt and die and bees disappear. The act of translating a book that lent itself to the cause of the endosulfan victims of Kasaragod, where aerial spraying of the pesticide in State-run plantations wreaked havoc

in the lives of many, is necessarily entwined with a politics that makes art resonate with a new vigour. Devika's translation, in that sense, is political and polemical, struggling to do justice to varied ethnic cultures and dialects that are interwoven into the original.

RELIGION AND PATRIARCHY

Barsa, a novel set in Saudi Arabia, speaks of the love and trials faced by a woman, not a Muslim by

These translations have carved out a space where the establishment of the Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University for preserving and promoting the linguistic and cultural oeuvre of Malayalam gains its supreme legitimisation.

birth, and a Muslim man who leave their homeland to work in the holy city of Mecca. The woman's choice of conversion to Islam and her differential experience of religion and patriarchy are issues that are handled with a rare candour and honesty by Kadeeja Mumtas. Again, a work that is so contemporary in its relevance following the recent controversies surrounding women's choices of marriage and religion, the novel becomes a must-read in the deft English translation by K.M. Sherrif.

DALIT WRITING

The politics of aesthetics surfaces again in *Don't Want Caste*, a short story collection that has been edited by the writer M.R. Renukumar, who, in his introduction, points out that the Malayali Dalit experience has clear and fundamental distinctions from Dalit literature in other Indian languages.

The seven decades of Dalit writing in Kerala that this selection spans, the 23 stories that paint the varied hues of the experience of fetishisation of caste in Kerala, the dehumanising of otherness, all come painfully alive in the painstaking precision with

which Abhirami Girija Srimam and Ravi Shanker have translated them. Here is a book that brims with empathy and a deep political sensitivity, and brings with it the risk of self-examination.

MEMOIR OF LOVE

He, My Beloved CJ is a poignant translation, assiduously rendered by G. Arunima, of Rosy Thomas' endearing classic memoir of her love for C.J. Thomas, a renowned playwright, critic and public intellectual.

One of the most significant aspects of this book is the Translator's Introduction, a critically rigorous and acerbic reading of the linguistic and cultural paradoxes that complicate both the writing and the writer. The translation brings alive the genial humour, the delicately tinged irony and idiosyncratic narration that renders the original so unique. As a mid twentieth century Kerala unfolds through the affective and intimate terrains of a woman's point of view, a book that defies straitjacketing as memoir, history or biography is born.

These translations have carved out a space where the establishment of a university for preserving



He, My Beloved CJ

Rosy Thomas
Translated by
G. Arunima

Women Unlimited

Pages: 178

Price: Rs.350



G. ARUNIMA.

and promoting the linguistic and cultural oeuvre of Malayalam gains its supreme legitimisation. The former Vice Chancellor of the Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, K. Jayakumar, can probably lay claim to

this project as one of the biggest achievements of the university. As Chairman of the advisory committee consisting of members such as K. Satchidanandan, E.V. Ramakrishnan, Jancy James, J. Devika, P.P. Raveendran, M.M. Basheer, T.M. Yesudasran, K.M. Sherrif and Mini Krishnan, Jayakumar can take pride in having launched what could be called the most laudable service ever in the history of Indian academia for the promotion of Malayalam language, its literature and culture.

Through her labour of passion and conviction, Mini Krishnan, as the consulting editor, has achieved the impossible in bridging the gap between academia and the publishing industry. In the age of globalisation, this is the triumph of a tiny State, a small university and a minor language that together they have created little histories that have the potential to mount big challenges to the linguistic chauvinism that looms large on the Indian horizon.

Modelled on this pattern of linguistic crossovers, the government of Tamil Nadu is designing a programme (both fiction and non-fiction) of Tamil-to-English and English-to-Tamil translations which will be carried out by the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation. □

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