

Water—A Novella

by Ashokamitran
 Trans. by Lakshmi Holmstrom
 Katha, New Delhi
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There is this Confucian insight that looks upon a great book as "a great evil". A great work of art transcends reality altogether and supersedes our ideas of morality and ethics. It does not confine itself within our narrow limits of good and evil: it spills over, and continues to do so. *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *War and Peace*, *Tin Drum*—to name a few. Ashokamitran's works in no way merit such a view. This is not to demean their intrinsic quality as good writing, but only to insist on their difference in temperament and insight. He is a writer who withholds the vision from the reader—it is simply not there for the taking. The words on the page and the way they are ordered lend themselves outright to be grappled with – even in translation – and what takes place is what takes shape as his vision. In all his works – right from his very first down to the latest this writer likes to tell the tale and to tell it in the way it occurs to him – in patches and pieces, a different order of reality, yet too real for the reader. Good or evil—just trust the teller!

Ashokamitran belongs to the eminent group of Tamil writers who won recognition for their masterly storytelling in the 1960s. The translator of *Tannir*, Lakshmi Holmstrom, notes that Ashokamitran engages himself in the urban underbelly of modern day life in the south Indian cities—Chennai, Hyderabad and Secunderabad. In one of our private conversations the writer informed me that he liked to talk about the life he has seen and experienced – urban, intimate and what on the surface appears unrelated. For him technique is what surfaces automatically – there is no straining after form and style. The story does it for him.

Beginning his literary career with the prize winning play *Anbin Parisu*, which was followed by many short stories, a collection of novellas, *Viduthalai*, and

eight novels, including *Karainda Nizhalka*, *Padinettavadu Atchakodu*, *Indru*, *Manasaravar* and *Vizhaa Maalai Podi*, Ashokamitran has followed a trajectory of personalized narration. He is evidently at home in the urban surroundings—at home in the sense of being able to locate and relocate himself and the characters that catch his roving eye. He depicts them in the background of their urban life as well.

In *Water* he has created a social documentary. This novella that runs into a hundred odd pages could be read at one single sitting. This brevity also would account for its intensity and poignancy. Two sisters—Jamuna and Chaya—and their struggle to live in the drought-ridden city occupy the center stage of the drama, while around them the saga of an entire humanity is portrayed.

In the introduction the translator, Lakshmi Holmstrom, notes that Ashokamitran has said that he wrote *Tannir* as a long short story, beginning only with a picture in his mind of a girl who was always seen to be carrying a huge water pot, whether it was at two in the morning or in the heat of the day at high noon. It was first serialized in *Kanaiyazhi* from July to November 1972 and published in its present form in 1973. Many critics in Tamil have drawn attention to the multifaceted levels of meaning in the work, including the symbolic overtones in the title. In her note the translator points out that the story describes the months of drought in Chennai in 1969, keenly observing the daily struggle of ordinary men and women to find enough water for their needs, their ingenious strategies, their ability to search out any source, and their interaction with an inept municipal staff which is incapable of providing the infrastructure necessary for a growing urban population. The discrete images of life in the sweltering city streets are

strung together as in a film. They are unified in one narrative as the winding street itself.

Jamuna and Chaya are the main characters. So is Teacher Amma who symbolizes the will to live under all odds—veering between a nagging household and a gritty career—and she seeps into Jamuna's life as a hot breeze. Bhaskar Rao stands for the city's debilitating force that draws everything into its sordid vortex and all but sucks Jamuna in too. The opening of the novella marks the significance of the events that follow:

Jamuna had been lying in bed for the past half hour listening to the water pump. As soon as she detected the slightest change in its sound she instantly shook herself awake and switching on the light, she picked up the two brass water pots and ran down stairs.

The entire narrative revolves round the imagery of water. The simple pressures of daily living and the higher spiritual levels of symbolic ablutions are washed over by this fluid image. The city's bustle, heat and dust, weave in and out of Jamuna's consciousness. While her more liberal minded sister Chaya moves about in a freer manner, Jamuna fumbles around not too keenly aware of where life is leading her. When Chaya suddenly leaves her in a fit of anger she feels her absence as a deep void that makes her life even more meaningless. Her abstract moments are exploited by the self-seeking Bhaskar Rao, who whisks her off into deeper recesses of the city's entrails only to make her dance to his tune. For Jamuna it hardly appears to matter whether she succumbs to him or to life in general. At the end of the narrative Bhaskar Rao's car is stranded in the muddy street, and he stands around quite helplessly. Chaya takes Jamuna's hand

exploited by the self-seeking Bhaskar Rao, who whisks her off into deeper recesses of the city's entrails only to make her dance to his tune. For Jamuna it hardly appears to matter whether she succumbs to him or to life in general. At the end of the narrative Bhaskar Rao's car is stranded in the muddy street, and he stands around quite helplessly. Chaya takes Jamuna's hand and the sisters move on unconcernedly—yet certainly more determined to face the odds of life. Throughout the story the tensions are built up by the patched up life in the streets that thirst for water. The Government workers who tear up the streets under some pretext or another only manage to mangle up the already dishevelled street life. The contractors and the supervisors appear and disappear like clockwork comic characters. However, amidst all these goings on there is another angle of life that the author draws our attention to. At one point Jamuna watches an old Telugu Brahmin widow carrying a pot of water on her hip

obviously under great strain. She staggers and falls. While Jamuna springs to her aid and attempts to pick up her water pot, the old lady cries out "Don't touch it. Don't touch it". Soon many others gather to aid her and someone inadvertently picks up her pot of water for her:

She rose unsteadily to her feet and grasped hold of her water pot, barely able to stand. She tipped out its contents—for it was still nearly half full—on to the ground. She shook herself free from Jamuna's grasp and tottered forward on her own. (p 81)

The rigidity of ritual purity that some orthodoxies insisted on heroically maintaining is clearly brought out through this stray incident. The writer willfully remains in seclusion and makes no interventions: the situation speaks for itself.

When all is said, *Water* is a novella that does not consciously strive to please

the reader. It depicts certain situations, characters in an impressionistic montage of happenings and much like the perennial imagery of *Water* it flows on: all characters linked up either by the scourge of scarcity of water or its dire need – both physical and spiritual.

This Katha Trailblazer edition is well brought out in an eminently handleable format and is readable. The cover painting by Shamshad Husanin shows three anxious women talking almost all at once in a most agitated manner while in the foreground there is a male figure patiently listening, turning its backside to us. The bright colours of their attire stand out against the dark background of the dust jacket. As soon as one picks up this book the narrative too picks up from these figures and meanders through, very much like flowing water.

Dr. S. Murali
Fellow, NMML

Teen Murti House, New Delhi

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