

Home and Away

Home and Away:
A Collection of Kannada Short Stories
by Ramachandra Sharma
Trans. by Padma and Ramachandra Sharma
New Delhi: Katha, 2001

The power and scope of the literature in the regional languages has been brought into focus by the discussions and arguments put forth by a large number of critics, writers, readers and others in the wake of the near-derogatory statements made by Salman Rushdie [in his introduction to the Vintage book of Indian Writing 1947-1997, that he co-edited with Elizabeth West (London: Vintage, 1997)] with regard to the literature in the various regional languages. What comes into focus here is the need for translation and greater exposure that is required by these literatures. And here Katha has stepped in to fill the much publicised lacunae.

This collection of stories in Kannada, by Ramachandra Sharma published by Katha is a step in the right direction. The collection contains 15 stories, ten of which have been translated by the author himself and the rest by Padma Ramachandra Sharma. As the translations have been mostly done by the writer himself, he has often resorted to free or creative use of words, which is probably excusable and the work could be termed a transcreation, rather than a mere translation. For instance, the title "Naadu Odeyitu", published in Kannada in 1950 has been translated as "Partition". The second title would perhaps be more appropriate in the broader frame of reference provided by the literary context of the translation. Ramachandra Sharma has been placed amidst the Modernist movement in Kannada, along with writers like U.R. Ananthamurthy, Shantinath Desai, Poornachandra Tejaswi and P. Lankesh. But he has been through another phase as well, the Progressive phase in Kannada literature, with its ideology and social commitment, which brought in a closer link between the literature and the people. This is the earlier phase in Kannada literature where the writers often explored forbidden topics and broke away from traditional subject matter in the thematic content of their stories. But with regard to structure and technical matters, they preferred to stay within the conventional fold. The stories in this

collection fall into two clear sections—that of the outer and the inner worlds—or more specifically, while some deal with the outer world at large in a broader canvas or backdrop the others focus on the specific and are self-exploratory. The first four belong to the progressive or the transitional period. They are essentially humanistic in their concern and in their treatment of traditionally taboo areas such as sex and societal mores; and in their exploration of themes like lust, sexuality and gender, they adopt a definitely unconventional approach. "Partition", "Confluence", "Forever, Burn" and "The Dear One" fall into this category. Many of these stories are often located outside the geographical terrain of India, but are definitely Indian, and more specifically Kannada in their sensibility. A large number of them have been written during the period from 1958 to 1983, when the author mostly remained away from India in different parts of the world. The title itself, "Home and Away", is suggestive of this attitude. As the author confesses in his brief note: "Some of the stories here have the countries where I worked as their backdrop and hence the title." The stories "The Dragonfly", "Replay", "The Fifth One", etc. are situated outside the geographical terrain of Karnataka. But the concerns are both indigenous and global. The second category of stories in this collection are more concerned with the writer's inner psyche and internal spaces. Both "Story" and "The Writer's Tale" are self-conscious exploratory attempts into the writer's efforts at creative introspection as well as an examination of the creative processes involved. In these stories the writer turns inward and explores the internal preoccupations and tensions of the writerly being, rather than the external societal circuits. Many of these stories belong to what Sharma himself has called the Diwakar Group, where the author professedly treats the character of Diwakar as his alter ego, once again signifying the self-consciously self-exploratory nature of

these tales. Ramachandra Sharma, in the Preface to his recent collection *Kathegarana Kathe* (A Writer's Tale) makes this attitude explicit. In these stories, he repeatedly dwells upon the various facets of creativity, and repeatedly resorts to themes related to the writer and his writing. In almost all the stories, he explores the mind and psyche of the individual characters and the protagonists in particular and this is probably the most unifying motif in the whole collection. He is very much concerned with the complex working of the inner selves of the individual souls and the delineation of characters and the mysterious workings of the subconscious mind in the stories. The story "Forever, Burn", for instance is more concerned with workings of Lalithamma/ Meenakshi's inner self and the multi-layered thought structure, rather than the simple-natured world without. "Confluence" deals with the thought structure of three people who construe the same situation differently. Sharma deals with a dark conscience-stricken world in the stories. Yet the world of his stories is not pessimistic. There is a movement towards a positive world-view with the element of happiness and hope pervading the closing lines of every story even though the physical conditions may be harsh or unfavourable. However, on the whole, I am afraid, the tales are nothing out of the ordinary—perhaps that is their saving grace as well. Simple and straightforward, the narrative world that Ramachandra Sharma creates exists in the space that he has carved out for himself. There is hardly any attempt to transcend the simple direct narrative—except perhaps in that one tale "Death" wherein the single sentence shuffles long toward its unbroken ending.

The book is as neatly produced as any other Katha production, with a cover designed by Nataraj Sharma, and there are hardly any mistakes or typographical errors in the text. It is essentially good reading stuff.

Usha V.T, teaches English Literature in Govt. College for Women, Trivandrum