

Arya and Other Stories

Chandrika Balan

New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2014, pp.144, Rs. 425/-, ISBN: 978-81-250-5680-5

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Appended with an insightful introduction by K. Satchidanandan, Chandrika Balan's *Arya and Other Stories* offers a rich conglomeration of Indian women (from Kerala) negotiating their deepest desires in a social space that straddles between conventional values and the demands of modern times. Written originally in Malayalam, Balan's self-translated collection steers through ancestral village homes to small towns and large cities with equal ease, portraying and calibrating the dimensions of the conflict of 'feminine' and 'feminist' impulses that war within and without the characters of her stories. These stories navigate through the dichotomy of *tharavad* (aristocrats' house) and *chanta* (the rural market or bazaar) to question the 'moral' values that are imposed upon, and therefore define the women in private and public spaces.

In his Introduction, Satchidanandan situates Balan's stories within the long tradition of the feminist movement and women's writing in Kerala. He foregrounds that Balan's stories demonstrate an instinctual penchant for exploring the "essential femininity" and "sisterhood with nature" that Satchidanandan sees in Kamala Das's stories. Balan, for him, also "inherits Saraswati Amma's humour, irony and anger at men's hypocrisy (17).

Navigating between the rural and urban landscapes of Kerala, Balan's characters are enmeshed in traditional and modern roles that are imposed upon them by their social spaces and conventions. Balan uses the images of nature (rain, forests, wind, et al.) as a powerful touchstone to convey the suppressed desires of her female protagonists, at times also of the feminine cosmos. For instance, the Devi of the first story, titled "Devigrammam" (A Devi's Village), reveals the mysterious and awfully divine connection that the benign village granny possesses. The

female protagonist connects this fecundity of natural/divine forces, so do her children, whose innocence makes them trust the pagan village goddess. They feel alienated from the logical skepticism of the protagonist's city bred husband. This theme of women's alienation from the excessively materialistic patriarchal world that they are forced to inhabit is a recurring feature in Balan's stories be it in "The Fifth One", "The People's Court", or "The Relevance of Graham Greene in the Life of a Bride", among other stories.

At the same time, the stories adopt powerful mythological analogies that enrich the cultural registers of the narrative. These analogies, at times, serve to reiterate the power of the female protagonist like Mable Simon's ("The People's Court") nom de plume Salome for her powerfully seductive feminist writings, which bear strong resonances with the "Biblical temptress who got John the Baptist beheaded" (57). On the other hand, in some cases, they highlight the ironic distance that the protagonists have from their powerful referents. For instance, Savitri, in "The Fifth One", would rather take her life than continue living with her husband, Satyam, in a loveless marriage—a stark contrast to the Savitri of Hindu mythology who fought with Yama, the God of Death, to revive her husband.

The stories flesh out women's innermost desires, anxieties and expectations that remain largely hidden from other characters — husbands, brothers, children — around them. The secret world of the protagonists adds layers to the sketches of their characters, thereby making them rich subjects of interest. There is such depth to Balan's layered exposition of their inner conflicts that these remain unarticulated in the external world even till the end. The alienation of these women from their immediate social surroundings is due to their sheer helplessness at the inexpressibility of their innermost

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feelings. Be it the orphaned Arya of "Arya" or the recently widowed old woman Subhadra in "A Companion for the Twilight Hour", the cheated wife in "The (Postmodern) Story of Jyoti Viswanath"; all are left helpless in the face of conventions of passive and muted womanhood imposed upon them by the social order.

Balan's artistic prowess lies in her wry humour, which at its best assumes an ironic or sarcastic tenor. More often than not, this helps in diffusing the sheer despondency of her characters' situation. Balan's insightful and economical wit successfully pulls the reader out of the irresolute conflict between personal desires and social realities. At the same time, Balan allows the unkind realities of her women's dilemmas to linger faintly in the minds of her readers. She shocks us along with her character, Smitha, with the revelation that her internet friend/love interest, while handsome and a top-notch engineer (read eligible bachelor) is on a wheelchair. Or, with the bride's horror at knowing that the love of her life, Praveen, used her and is willing to still use her sexually; her only choice being to return to her husband to be raped every night. The satirical twists, jarring her protagonists' lives, leave a deep imprint on the readers' minds.

Nevertheless, Balan's women are not always passive or betrayed. The writer paints her female characters with fine strokes, combining wit and depth that reveal their active negotiations with their situations. In "The Story of a Poem", Sushma's hidden desires for her unrequited premarital love, of which her chauvinist leering husband Reguraman remains unaware, find voice in a poem. Her everyday chore of writing a poem and tearing it (before her husband returns home from work) can be construed as a cyclical pattern of Sushma's subversion of the imposed role of a passive wife. On the other hand, certain stories expose the sheer gullibility of women like Indu Kumari, whose ambition to appear on reality television

leads her to naively encourage and participate in her own abduction in "Sponsors Please". Such caustic humour makes the reader experience shock, dismay and sarcasm in such quick succession that it is simply impossible to reduce these stories to a single moral or message.

While the female protagonists are neatly carved with great attention to detail, the same cannot be said of the men in her stories, who appear more or less as disappointing figures. All the husbands in her stories are caricatured as chauvinists, sexually violent or promiscuous, or more. However, barring their acts of betrayal of their wives' expectations or faith, one does not get further insights into their situation. In other words, they may be perceived as catalysts that allow Balan to solely narrate the story of her female protagonists.

In addition, stories like "Bonsai" and "The (Postmodern) Story of Jyoti Vishwanath" seem inclined towards far-fetched moral implications. Consequently, they adversely affect her feminist stance. In the former, the outgoing feminist, Champaka Menon's hobby of bonsai cultivation is probably the reason why her grandson is a dwarf. Similarly, Jyoti's long hours of work are the probable reason for her husband's straying into a liaison with the domestic help. While this can be taken in a sarcastic tenor, it is Jyoti's silent acceptance of her state, despite being financially capable that underlines the moral implications. It is this aspect that to some extent mitigates the punch of this collection in the ambit of gender discourse.

Nevertheless, Chandrika Balan's *Arya and Other Stories* is a rewarding read due to its fine interweaving of *tharavad* and *chanta* to offer a synoptic glimpse into the moorings of women caught in the middle of frozen conventions of femininity and their urgent inner desires and expectations of being a woman.