

## The Concept of Hypocrisy in Lakshmi Kannan's *Parijata and Other Stories*

Dr. Pauline Das

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Lakshmi Kannan

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### Abstract

India is a nation that is slowly ridding itself of a constricting traditional base. Writers like Lakshmi Kannan have taken the society as a background for their stories. The Indian society that is caught in a transitional phase is highlighted. The hold of tradition and the changes in the society leave the female characters to struggle to expose the hypocrisy that the society practices without any qualms.

**Key words:** Lakshmi Kannan, parijata, exploitation of women

### Vehicles through Which Anomalies are Exposed

*The Webster's New Dictionary* defines the term 'hypocrisy' as 'assuming a false appearance of virtue'. The other terms for 'hypocrisy' are: insincerity; deceit; dissembling; double-talk; duplicity; falsity; imposture; lip-service; phoney ; pietism; pretense; quackery; sanctimoniousness; self-righteousness; speciousness and two-facedness.

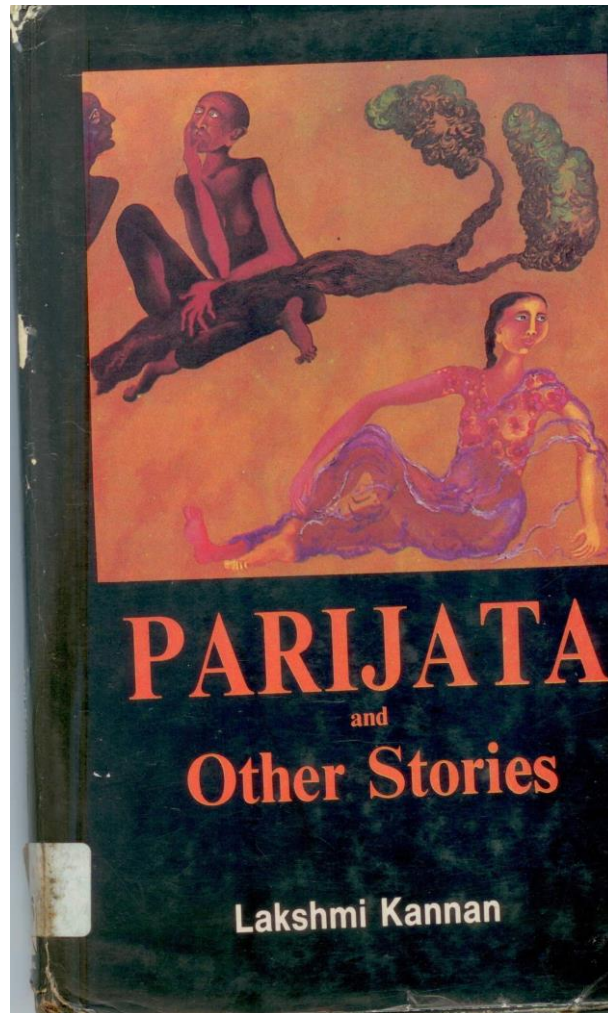
Lakshmi Kannan's short stories are vehicles through which the above said anomalies in the society are exposed. Very often it is the woman who suffers for the hypocritical behavior of

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the society. Being a female writer, Kannan wants to make an awakening in the minds of women to protect themselves against this attack. With a feminine sensibility the writer uncovers this negative attitude that society harbours against women. Her protagonists are decent, delicate characters who are puzzled by society's partial measure toward them.



Lakshmi Kannan's *Parijata and Other Stories* was published in 1992 and 1993 respectively. Real life in contemporary India and the sensibility of the middle class families are presented in these stories. The double standards for children and women because of gender-bias and double standards in all walks of life become a recurrent theme.

## Maria

The short story 'Maria' discusses the problems of an erring female who is secluded from society because of her wrong mores. But the same standard does not seem to affect a man. While a lesbian is made fun of and openly commented on, a homosexual's wrong relationship is celebrated by men as if it is a virtue. Kannan does not side with the erring female, but is able to point out that a mistake should be the same for everyone, be it a male or female.

There are certain good aspects even in the character of a woman who commits errors. She is branded for bad behaviour and not appreciated for anything at all. Even the writers, the so called elite, who profess to be the guardians of society, are prone to such hypocrisy. Lakshmi Kannan calls for a sympathetic understanding for the female characters like Maria, who have suffered a lot in this male chauvinistic world and so, perhaps communicate with others only in the way they know. 'Maria,' portrays a victim trying to reverse her role in a way she knows, but falling down again as victim, due to the hypocritical assessment men make of her.

Man's ego goes to the extent of not giving a woman the benefit of doubt. For him a woman is created to make a man happy, and not another woman. "Lesbianism is born of failure, and is doomed to end up in failure". (p.19) He fails to see that if lesbianism is a perversion, so is homo-sexuality. This powerful short story takes a deep root in our hearts, moving us to pity the plight of women under the tyrannical opinion of men, the hypocrites who can glorify their mistakes and blow up large any mistake they can find, or even suspect in a woman.

### **Thirteen Days After**

'Thirteen Days after' is a short story that reveals the callousness of people to understand the bereaved one's state of mind. This world is a fast, mad world, with every one pacing up and down meaninglessly, talking small talk, attaching a lot of importance to dressing, feigning compassion and making merry. But we all forget that death is the only end and there is no escape from it.

This story talks about the hypocrisy of life itself. Lakshmi Kannan speaks about the doll-like appearance that women put on for others, for which they clothe themselves in fine dresses, put on a smile on their faces, talk sweetly, talk with a bright intelligence to please not

themselves but, for a maddening circuit of people, frittering away their time in small talk. Lakshmi Kannan, in this short story, makes the protagonist reflect on what life is all about (during her days of mourning for her dead father) and discovering that life is but a vanity.

### **Maze**

The short story 'Maze' represents the hypocrisy practiced in our work places where dubious characters outsmart the others. The scene in an office, if we look carefully, is one of survival not of the fittest, but of ones who practice hypocrisy. 'Maze' is a story that brings to light the underhand activities of people in their work places, to push themselves up in their jobs. In this mad world of power, honest people are pushed back, in spite of always doing their work with unflagging energy and smooth efficiency. People who are preoccupied with their office work and concerned about the growth of the company are always defeated by people, who are loud and circulating in the right circles. They are wily and operative, equipped with all the strategies needed for promoting themselves before promoting the company product.

Men move about in their work in sections of triumph and defeat. Some gather together, mingle and move on. Some get separated and lonely. Inside the sphere of the office they are caged like helpless prisoners caught in a strong force-field. They hit against each other, collide, get bruised, whereas some trip and fall. Some would concentrate on the single target of being promoted and move towards it with a single-minded motivation. But sometimes their purpose would be defeated; they get confused and lose their way, running in the wrong direction, for life is but a maze.

### **Parijata**

'Parijata' is yet another story where in the name of god, religion, piety, tradition and worship, society leads a hypocritical life. To begin a good day, one should not face a widow first thing in the morning, a widow should not worship god, because you need to worship you cannot be magnanimous to share some flowers with another person – these are some of the hypocritical practices that women of the older generation followed. Lakshmi Kannan wishes to purge off these double standards. 'Parijata' deals with the true theme of prejudice imposed by society in the name of religion and faith. This story reveals the hypocrisy of traditional ways.

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## Sweet Reasonableness

‘Sweet Reasonableness’ takes us to the height of hypocrisy where man often becomes insane, failing to understand that he is only a hypocrite, brought up and nurtured in hypocrisy. And man would certainly make a fool of himself, when woman becomes smart and turns her back on the whimsical pain that he would bestow on her so graciously. This story reveals the sad plight a man would fall into, when a woman leaves him. His male ego will still accuse the woman as the wrongdoer. Even after a divorce he cannot understand himself, but becomes insane with his headstrong views.

‘Sweet Reasonableness’ reveals the height of hypocrisy a male could show in being unreasonable to the core, by asking a woman to be reasonable. He doesn’t understand the desires, ideas, objectives, or anything about a woman, but believes he does. He believes not in correcting his mistakes, but in demanding the privilege of being forgiven by her. His strong conviction is that freedom is something to be bestowed upon a female by a male, even in the matter of her way of dressing. He believes he has given her total freedom to take up a job and earn her salary, whereas the truth is that he needs her salary, and he would simply squander and blow up her hard-earned money, without any qualms.

It is just unnerving for him to see a woman not in tears when he slaps her. For him a woman without tears is a woman who has lost her femininity. For him, it is only right for her to wail and cry out in pain and plead with him to accept her, despite everything. If not, it is right to provoke her to extremes, in order to turn the blame squarely on her.

The husband who cannot be calm wants the woman to think over and see things clearly in his favour. She should think clearly and intelligently, to face problems with courage, maintaining her poise and carrying herself with a confidence, yet without losing her sense of modesty. For him, a woman ought to serve a husband who would order her about; he would be rude to her parents, to her friends; he would tear off the letters that came for her, without her knowledge. Whenever the mood gets a hold of him, he would find fault with her at every step, scold her and

slap her. Yet he reasons, that he is not her enemy, but wants to keep her happy and sincerely wishes to see her grow and develop in her career. He only wants her to cultivate good people. He's a husband who is always interested in seeing her full potential. The story's climax is the hypocrisy of this unreasonable husband who hopes that his wife will eventually listen to reason and preserve the sacrament of marriage.

### **The Turn of the Road**

"The Turn of the Road" is a short story that reminds us that the inevitable death is not in our hands. No one can predict anybody's death. It claims a husband or a wife separately. A church accepts the graves of people within its borderline. This particular aspect of Christianity is something that appeals to the readers. In an *Agraharam*, people are impatient to dispose off a dead body. It is far worse in villages. They won't even cook any food till the body is removed.

In this story, the father wishes to go to the Perumal Temple after his surgery, but unfortunately he dies the day before the surgery. The son wants to fulfill his father's desire by slowing down the ambulance in which his father's body lay, in front of the temple. But the priest harshly tells him to go fast, the priest who practices holiness, the priest who obeys God.

'The Turn of the Road' is again the hypocrisy of our superstitious beliefs. The same society which believes that we are gods, that god dwells in our living body, that god is our creator, in the name of purity, becomes restless to dispose the body when someone is dead. Lakshmi Kannan draws attention to Christian practices where the church accepts the graves of people within its borderline, whereas the Hindu religion tries to get rid of the body.

### **About Face**

'About Face' deals with people's preference for good-looking ones, and their prejudiced views about the not so lucky ones who look very ordinary. Very often we judge people by their looks and practice double – standards with people. In schools, in colleges, in offices, in public places, the good looking ones get preference first. Lakshmi Kannan brings our attention to this undeniable fact in life. In this story the shallow minded stupid girls are

patronized in an office, even when they make blunders, but the authorities lose their temper when Shanta, the not so good-looking girl, commits a slight mistake.

Lakshmi Kannan shows not only how do we judge others by their faces, but also judge places according to the furniture and other material things found there. Similarly, the ones who work very hard are given uncomfortable chairs in an office, whereas the higher official who extracts work from his subordinates and claims the work as his own, is given the best chair. In this story Lakshmi Kannan attacks the hypocritical attitude of society, the differences that it makes between the rich and the poor, the ordinary looking and the good-looking.

### **Sable Shadows at the Witching Time of Night**

‘Sable Shadows at the Witching Time of Night’ throws light once again on the learned lot who profess equality and indiscrimination, yet are frightened of blackness. The blackness of the black people has cast a shadow of darkness within their own minds that they become suspicious of a Nigerian writer. Eventually he proves this idea wrong with his majestic way of handling himself. Another white man in the story who is believed to do the right according to popular views, on the other hand, is by far a suspicious character. Lakshmi Kannan once again makes us realize how hypocritical the words of people can be.

Color discrimination is found everywhere. In India, the color of the skin has the power to alter the very fate of a person, the distinctions running into many gradations like ‘rose pink’, ‘very fair’, and golden brown’, ‘golden wheat’, or just ‘wheat’, then ‘dark’, ‘sooty dark’, or ‘so dark that if you touch, you may get strained’... and so on (117). Lakshmi Kannan brings our attention to the fact that most men and women are guided by their bias on the appearance of a person in terms of the color of his/her skin. She wishes that this color can be washed off. Nevertheless, it is an obstinate color that cannot be scraped off from the skin, neither can the skin be peeled off or thrown away.

The story opens in Washington D.C, where all the writers selected from different countries gather to participate in the International Writing Program. One of the participants is Professor Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, from Nigeria. He is a very distinguished and well known



senior writer. His novels and books are widely read in England, the USA and in other English speaking countries. Ike also has a long innings in the field of education and public service. He is always so gentle, soft spoken, his voice low and well bred, his language bearing an unmistakable stamp of refinement and culture. For all his achievements, Ike is incredibly modest.

He talks now about literature, the compulsive urgency that makes one write, talks about religious rituals in general and about America. According to him the native tribal culture has become weak and demoralized under foreign domination. This makes some native people lose their self-respect in their own eyes to such an extent that they feel ashamed of their own culture. The other writers in the forum do not take much interest in his talk, but Ike as a black has borne humiliation and neglect for generations now. He is sure that no one can take away the black people's happiness from them. They are proud of their negritude, their blackness, and nobody can pluck it away from them.

The narrator is amazed at the way this major writer, known all over the larger parts of the world can take it all. Being slighted is little more than a petty accident for him, something very negligible. He brushes it away like dirt and walks away from the place with the familiar, easy self-confidence. In his conversation with the narrator he tells her how Christianity was thrust on them in the name of civilizing Africans after which they were ambushed in every way. For example, if a person wishes to join a school and receive education, he would first have to become a Christian. He would get baptized, he would be given a Christian name which he will have to accept. That is how this Nigerian writer became Vincent. At school, he would have to push his own mother tongue into the background, and would earn some punishment for speaking his own language.

Yet Vincent also admits in all honesty, that many of the atrocities in the Nigerian society were brought under some control only after the conversion to Christianity, Polygamy, for instance. The narrator finds that Vincent is the only man who comes forward to discuss literature or writing so very honestly. In the writer's circle a gossip goes on about the friendship between the narrator and Vincent. They mistake Vincent because he is a Nigerian. The other writers frustrate the narrator by making simplistic, reductive classifications. She wonders why while a



man who really believes in women's talents comes forward to respect her, women cannot bring themselves to accept a rare male writer like him as their own colleague. In this story Lakshmi Kannan reveals the hypocrisy of the elite in professing themselves to be forward in their thoughts, yet being carried away by this prejudice of colour distinction.

### **India Gates**

'India Gates' wishes to crack down on our hypocritical practices within the limits of a household, where the husband exposes himself as a provider, he doesn't want his wife to work outside and suffer, and how traditional families practice such good customs as respecting the elders, paying obeisance to them and serving the men and the elders first. The truth is that man has been selfish and is not self sufficient to do his own duties, wives are only unpaid servants; even if she works outside, her earnings are his; she has to struggle in both the places without help; she cannot come late; and she ought to sustain herself only with the left-over food. The institution of marriage which is a bond between a man and his wife is actually a bond between a master and his slave in our tradition..

'India Gate' chastises the attitude of people regarding the institution of marriage. Women lose their freedom and are tied to humiliation and hard work in the name of marriage. It looks as if the entire lot in a joint family gathers to look down upon women. And most of the daughters-in-law also accept their prescribed roles and expect the new ones coming to follow suit. In this story our attention is drawn once again to the anxiety of parents to marry their girls off within a particular age. Even if they find the prospective son-in-law dumb, if the horoscopes match, then the marriage is fixed.

Padmini and Balaraman have taken the same kind of competitive examination to reach their present positions in the bank. They have gone through the same stages, have qualified the same way. When Padmini is as old as Balaraman, perhaps shall also be promoted the same way. She shall earn the same salary. But when the marriage is fixed, Padmini is asked to resign her job because Balaraman is transferred to Delhi. Fortunately Padmini too gets a transfer to Delhi, along with the promotion. She need not make her parents unhappy by refusing to marry Balaraman. Padmini is happy that she can hang on to her job in Delhi.

After marriage Padmini watches with horror how women are treated in Balaraman's house. Beginning from the morning, the elders are first fed, then the men. Women get only the left over, which is insufficient for them. The best part of the food is served to the men, and the older women, and the daughters-in-law help themselves to the sediments and the left-over. After food, when the others retire, the daughters-in-law have to grind rice, make vadams and such other duties.

Padmini understands that she has been a perfect fool in agreeing to marry a spineless coward. She has voluntarily fallen into the same bottomless pit. Padmini, who has a solid academic background, who has a good profession in the bank, is reduced to a servant in Balaraman's house.

In an angry tone Lakshmi Kannan lashes out at the very institution of marriage itself. In a Tamil Brahmin family, marriage which represents a bond between a husband and wife is only a bond between a master and a slave, a bonded laborer. The wife, the bonded laborer is scared that she has no place to go, she becomes a victim of her own demonic hunger and contends herself with the left-over sediments of food which seem to be her manna.

### **Double Standards Thoroughly Exposed**

Lakshmi Kannan's short stories make the readers become aware of the hypocrisy behind every action. In her stories nothing goes unnoticed. Every detail and every word shocks us into this reality. At a time when India was awakening to the hypocrisy of traditional superstition her stories came, offering a ready hand to enlighten the masses. They are very powerful and challenging to the readers' minds. Lakshmi Kannan endeavors to expose hypocrisy in our society, particularly with the practices of the Tamil Brahmins. The double standards that are measured out to women in terms of their upbringing in the family, in work circles, as daughters-in-law, as the sick and suffering and such, are exposed.

Lakshmi Kannan does not lash out at the hypocrisy that women suffer alone. She talks of hypocrisy prevalent in our society at every juncture, be it for men in the office as shown in the

short story 'The Maze', or the colour discrimination that even the elite unwittingly profess, or the superficial practices that we practice in the name of tradition and religion.

### **Realistic Picture**

*Parijata and other Stories* and *India Gate and other Stories* were published in the nineties, and hence her stories reflect the travails of growing up in the society then. The restrictions that society imposed on women during that time were numerous. Kannan's protagonists are full-blown rebels in some of the stories, and rebels only to a certain extent in the others. They represent the difficulties in rebelling for their rights against the docility that is expected of them. Many of her stories are food for thought even today, for although many women may have changed their dress styles, they are still imprisoned inside their own mental cocoons.

The decades from the seventies to the nineties witnessed the rise of the new woman who instead of being in conflict with the male, learns to realize her woman power by rejecting forced lack of choice and accepting responsibility for self. The march, however, is not smooth and the short story writers have been judiciously balanced in their narratives, the lived reality of women's lives with their own doubts, beliefs and convictions.

### **Discontented Life**

The women are the protagonists in most of her stories and each one is portrayed as leading a discontented life, either by becoming a victim of harsh fate, or crouching under the burden of a mindless custom, or consequent to the assumption that the woman's role is only to play second fiddle to man. There is ample justification in grouping Lakshmi Kannan among the feminist writers who wield their pen to focus on problems which are of relevance to women. It is of significance that her heroines are drawn from the middle class families who happen to be at the receiving end, in the face of calamity, denied the balm of human kindness and abandoned by their dear ones. They are only given a liberal dose of platitudes and prefer their state of suffering, comparing it with something more disastrous that could have been.

### **Vulnerability and Perplexity of Life**

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The stories unfold with the vulnerability of life. The complacent tradition cracks up, defenseless against the more pressing urgency of life or repetitive patterns of perversity, masquerading as absolute “traditions”, forcing woman to claw their way to sense and sanity, two things they owe to the century and to fellow women. These are stories that take in the unspoken terror and intimidation in work places, reducing women to accept their lot in a mute, animal-like endurance. Or they speak about women, who are caught in the ambiguity of sifting sexual mores, herself the predator, herself the victim.

There are also the stories of men and women picking their way in perplexity through an eroded meeting ground. Lakshmi Kannan reveals human minds that have moved over to make room for the dictates of the eye that cannot really “see” anything beyond the stubborn colour of the skin. She also speculates about the terrifying mortality of gods whose designs are incomprehensible, when they are not fallible.

### **Bitter-Sweet**

The taste of Kannan’s writing is bittersweet, with laughter and joy sharing the stage with sorrow, tears and suffering, the humble and commonplace standing with pride alongside the opulent and spectacular. Her stories have a regional flavor. Her stories are also pleasing to the mind because of her lovable characters, and they are also creative, original and very, very novel. The readiness of her pen is more than fulfilling.

### **Economy of Expression**

Lakshmi Kannan always strives for economy in expression and looks for a concise way of putting things together. Even in her fiction her style goes staccato in places. A deeper reason is a desire to leave a pool of silence in the reader’s mind. She abstains from saying anything more than she should. Dr. Lakshmi Kannan’s short stories can take you to the environment around you, the universe, and the mysteries of other living beings breathing along with you, the tress, plants, flowers, birds, and animals giving you a sense of participation. Her works are truly elevating.

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