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Love is More Than Language
Feminine Sensibility in the Works of Lakshmi Kannan

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Introduction

Lakshmi Kannan writes in English and, under the pen name 'Kaveri' in Tamil. She also writes poetry in English. Besides translating her own works into English, she has also translated the works of many major Tamil writers. Some of her important works include 'Rhythms' (short fiction translated from the original Tamil, 'Osaigal'); three poetry collections - 'Exiled Gods', 'The Glow and the Grey', and 'Impressions'; 'Wooden Cow' (Translation of T.Janakiraman's novel 'Marappasu') ; and 'Through the Veils' (Translation of Indira Parthasarathi's novel 'Thiraigalukku Appaal).

Women Committed to a Strong Feminine Sensibility

The stories of Lakshmi Kannan are sharply evocative and haunting in their exploration of the lives of women in India, and Indian women living abroad. The women in these stories are unforgettable in their struggle towards self-realization, committed to a special feminine sensibility, strong-willed, pathetic and rebellious and a kind of revelation of a new and unexpected dimension of an ordinary simple reality.

Selected Short Stories and Poetry

Three of her stories, 'Muniyakka', 'A Pea in the Mattress' and 'Pain' from her short story collection *India Gate and Other Stories* and her poetry style are analyzed in the feministic perspective in this article.

Muniyakka's Plight

'Muniyakka' pictures the life of a woman who had been battered and torn by her husband, sons and destiny. The author Lakshmi Kannan enters into the inner psyche of womanhood and tells a captivating story. Muniyakka's mastered art of soliloquy during her work shows her inner turmoil. Her routine duties of mopping, sweeping and cleaning, to sustain herself in her old age is really touching.

The Sufferings of a Wife and Mother

Lakshmi Kannan, through her splendid narration, presents a word picture for the readers. Muniyakka's back breaking effort to water the garden, her solemn love for the green

vegetation, the breeze brushing past the trees and the trees making a hissing sound are presented as the pulsating rhythm through which her very being is identified.

Muniyakka has a very strange behaviour. She would keep muttering to herself while working. Children call her a walkie-talkie. Most of her mutterings are against her dead husband Bairappa and their three careless sons. Sometimes Muniyakka used to scold all the devotees who stain the stones of the temple with kumkum, sandalwood paste, and the smudgy sprinkling of withered flowers. It would be a free curse for everyone from the mouth of this old lady. She wonders why all these married young women were praying for a son. She had three sons herself and what worthless creatures they turned out to be. Her husband Bairappa drank, gambled, squandered all her hard earned money and finally died, leading a wasted life.

The Sensitive Ever-Loving Quality of Womanhood

But in spite of all her anger against her dead husband, Muniyakka always celebrates Bairappa's *sraddha*. It is more of a love-hate relationship. On this day she has a youthful glow on her face with a large round kumkum on her forehead, flowers in her hair and a clean cotton saree wrapped around her old body. One also wonders whether such celebration is in some manner a celebration of her own liberation. Lakshmi Kannan, through the portrayal of Muniyakka, emphasizes the finer, sensitive and ever-loving quality of womanhood.

The Vibrating Personality in Women

In the story 'A Pea in the Mattress', Lakshmi Kannan shows that a woman is not a puppet in the hands of a man. She is a vibrating personality like any other being. Shobha, the central character of the story, is an understanding wife but caught between her duties towards her own family and the love she has for her husband. Her husband, Shekhar, is a bright, brilliant and work-conscious man. He does not understand what torments his wife all day.

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Shobha wants to go to work and thus support her family but her husband rejects her proposal. Apart from this, there is artificiality in his actions. He does not want to take his wife to official gatherings but puts it in such a manner that she herself would get bored during such occasions. At the same time, he asks Shobha to attend the party hosted by his friend Balaji. For the first time Shobha rebels and moves away from her husband's ordered path. She avoids Balaji's dinner and goes to a tavern along with her friends Phyllis, Janet, Peter and Cathy. The last two live together without being married. Shobha wonders what a well-matched couple they make in spite of being unmarried. She feels that they do not need the artificial glue of the ritual called marriage.

Woman as a Rebel

Very soon Shobha drinks martini with them. In a semi-conscious state because of consumption of martini, she removes a picture from the wall of the tavern and slips it into her bag. This is not seen by any of her friends but a manager notices this and brings the theft to the notice of Peter. Shobha hands back the picture. Peter consoles Shobha and tells her that he would fetch a picture just like the one she had taken. But, deep inside, Shobha feels that for the first time in her life she has jumped over the line of 'Quality Control' which had been instituted in her throughout her life. At least once in her lifetime, she had broken away from the programmed goodness and allowed her soul to feel the freshness of freedom. It is assumed that she had ceased being a pea in the mattress of her husband.

The Uniqueness of Feminine Qualities

In the story 'Pain' Lakshmi Kannan once again ushers in the feminine qualities and their uniqueness in this man's world. It is a touching story because it deals with the feelings and emotions of a woman who is on her deathbed. Padma is undergoing the torture of pain in her body because of cancer. The description of the outside and the inside of Padma is outstanding. Lakshmi Kannan describes her condition as that of being on a parole from Yama.

A team of doctors unanimously predicts that Padma would not survive beyond this point. The cancer, started initially from her uterus, had also spread to her breasts with terrible speed. Under the grip of pain she lay writhing. To get rid of the pain she had been drugged with heavy doses of powerful, pain – killing sedatives. But when the drug was not administered, she saw blue-veins turn purple and swollen into the throbbing ropes, pulling and tearing at the muscles and tendons, the body curled in hopeless surrender as the pain went on in hopeless surrender as the pain went on in uninterrupted waves, boring into the very marrow of the bones chillingly. The house brimmed with relations as the news started to reach far and wide.

In Death There is No Difference between the Genders

Seshadri and Padma are proud parents of two beautiful daughters, Usha and Prema. Usha was more matured and represented in some way feminine culture. Her aunt started discussing how the cancer would have spread from the uterus, to the stomach and then to the breast. It looked as if she was dissecting her body into pieces. She wonders at the way a woman's body is assessed, evaluated, and judged, sometimes by other women or at times by relatives, friends and men. Her body had served its purpose of giving birth to two daughters. She is now ready to offer it to a hungry pyre. Padma begins to imagine the Arlington cemetery. Through this imagination part the author ushers in the fact that in the graveyard there is no difference between the sexes and between the organs. Once the body is placed inside the earth and covered with greenery, then the decomposition starts. For, the process of decomposition does not have any biased attitude. Beneath the soil, nobody is separate, no disease is separate. There is no difference for earth or for the fire in consuming the human body.

The Changing Realities for Women

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The stories are apparently feminist in their themes, treatment and language. Lakshmi Kannan started writing in her teen-age years and began as more of a humorist than a serious writer. “I liked to read humorous stuff at that period in time, but I realized I am not just here to make people laugh,” she said. She wanted to write about and react to the changing realities for women. She can choose the proper word for love, feelings of separation, feelings lost in this world. She addresses the reader in the delicate voice of poetry and a prose which has a bold poise combined with wit. Her transparent translation retains the power and enigmatic silences of the original, spinning around a range of social parameters.

Asserting a Woman’s Language

One’s own age and the times one lives in can never be ignored or wished away. Lakshmi Kannan, who is from the post-Independence era, saw many changes as a child and as a young woman. For one thing, a regional identity in terms of asserting one’s own language (the vernacular) seemed to take on an almost political colouring, as if it was done as an antidote to the postcolonial hangover that was still lingering. It was the closest she could get to “nationalism.” Another change that she noticed was an awareness of feminist thoughts, even if “feminism” was at a nascent stage and was yet to be articulated clearly. She grew on this slow-but-unsteady movement that came to be called feminism. Her voice was heard, she registered, recorded, debated, and contested her point of view. There was as much approval of what she wrote on the one hand, as there was much hostility on the other. So it sort of blew hot and cold for her.

Feminism in the West

The Asian women in particular had to contend with very deep-seated traditional and social mores that were hard to rationalise. The term “modern” in itself seemed to be suspect, and always seemed to beg a question. This had an impact on their governments and political leaders as well. We have learned a lot from the colloquiums with our Western counterparts, from Europe, the North American zones and other areas. We have admired the way they handled the tough deal they had in their countries in their work place, their marriages, relationships, the very economics of their lives and so on. Many of them had to define what was “feminine” for their society and it was impressive to see how they grappled with the diffuse scene to eventually forge a language that came to be understood by the entire world of feminist thinkers.

There were some seminal, path-breaking books on feminism that were most iconoclastic about the evolution of a feminist philosophy: Essentially, a philosophy of being, nothing less. These national and international events made for a learning experience and helped every woman and man to evolve a philosophy of life. Because it called for some kind of a revolution in thinking, even unlearning in some ways, today we’ve moved on to a realm where we’ve taken the feminist arguments to the level where it rightly belongs—that of *human rights*. It’s as simple as that. All these concerns touch each generation and each age group in a special way. For example, you see the wide range of career options for young women now. A few decades back,

only a few standard options were considered “proper” or “respectable” for young women.

The Erasure of Talent, Language Skill and Arts

Lakshmi Kannan’s poem “Don’t Wash” was selected by the British Council for their women writers’ website they launched recently as www.womenswriting.com. She has always celebrated the struggle of the so-called “ordinary” women (and men) in her writings, be it fiction or poetry. They come through as truly heroic in the way they strive to triumph over their endless struggles in life. In this poem there is a reversal of role for water. For, indeed, Rasha Sundari Devi should not wash away her magical scribbling on the kitchen wall.

Living within what could be termed as a *brutal culture of erasure*, the woman had to save her writings from being erased. She and her writings are one: she is the subject, and she is also the creator of her destiny. Indian patriarchy is so clever and calculating that it can take what it wants from a woman (her utility as a homemaker, wife, mother, and breadwinner) and erase all else that fall into the category of talent, language skill, or the arts. The will, determination and the sheer ingenuity of this woman, as she forged ahead to teach herself the language of Bangla at a time when literacy was denied to women and it was a definite taboo, is something admirable. She starts right from the scratch, learning the alphabet in the hardest way, almost stealing words and letters like she was a thief. So it is not as if Lakshmi Kannan wrote her history, she has herself written her life-history in the widely acclaimed *Amar Jiban*.

Transition, Change and Decay in the Context of Water

As mentioned earlier, Lakshmi Kannan’s pen name is “Kaaveri” and she constantly situate and intermingle rivers (Ponni, Gomti, Ganga) and women. These rivers voice about women that women themselves cannot: the mirthful abandon with which women splash about in water when they bathe, or when they want to get drenched in the rain like in “O For Shame”? Without verbalizing or articulating their desires and their aspirations, the women just express their joy and oneness with the feel of water on their bodies, on their being. It’s such an intimate relationship. The river Gomti lashes out at embankments to make her presence felt—and feared—or else she is taken for granted. And in an extended prose-poem titled “Ponni Remembers”- Ponni is the river Kaaveri - all women are totally free in their watery form to live life on their terms. Rivers touch a very deep chord in the Indian mind and poets like A. K. Ramanujan and Keki Daruwalla have dwelt on themes like transition, change and decay in the context of rivers. But Lakshmi Kannan sculpts so many diverse themes with water. Her poem “Crossing the River” is about transition, from this life to the next, and “A River Remembers” has a hint of decay in the way it traces the decadent elements in a retrograde culture.

Lakshmi Kannan’s Style of Writing

Lakshmi Kannan always strives for economy in expression and looks for a concise way of putting things. Even in her fiction her style goes staccato in places. A deeper reason is the desire to leave a pool of silence in the reader’s mind. Writing should both create and sustain

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the silence of reflection in the reader's mind. So she abstains from saying anything more than she should.

Feminine Creative Sensibility

Women are so creative in their lives—whether they are into writing, painting, music or any creative arts or not is irrelevant to this aspect. They are already re-arranging paradigms for themselves.

With poets, it becomes easier as they can re-create lives, and in the process of writing, they can discover a path or a direction, as also a whole new grammar and language to address this very complexity of their lives. That makes things clear for themselves. The politics of language in the postcolonial scenario definitely influenced her as a writer and as a person. As for the politics of gender, it's so pervasive that one can never wish it away.

Lakshmi Kannan's short stories and poetry can take you to the environment around you, the universe, the mysteries of other living beings breathing along with you, the trees, plants, flowers, birds, animals giving you a sense of participation, the whole world, the world of feminine sensibility. Her works are truly elevating.

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