

THE BOOK REVIEW

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Languages In Translation

₹100

Assamese/অসমীয়া



Bangla/বাংলা



Gujarati/ગુજરાતી



Hindi/हिंदी



Kannada/ಕನ್ನಡ



Malay/Melayu

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Marathi/मराठी

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The Book Review Literary Trust is a charitable, non-profit Trust, set up in 1989. One of its chief ongoing projects is the publishing of the review journal *The Book Review* which completed its 44th year in December 2020.

The Book Review was the first review journal in the English language in India and has been in continuous publication for the last 44 years. In this time, it has promoted scholarly debate, Indian writing in all languages, South Asia studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and many other aspects of writing and publishing, becoming the benchmark, across the world, for critical reviews of works published in South Asia. Globally, leading experts in fields as diverse as international relations, Gandhian studies, and Indian history, regularly contribute to the journal. Covering a very broad array of subjects, this pioneering venture has rendered a unique service to the literary and academic community and the reading public.

The Book Review is brought out in a print edition, as well as a digital edition accessible on its website:

<http://thebookreviewindia.org>. The journal's primary revenue for ongoing operations is from advertising revenue and subscriptions.

As the journal is in the 45th year of publication, and The Book Review Literary Trust has completed 31 years, the Trustees have put in place an agenda for the continuance of its activities in the coming decades. The Trust now seeks large grants/endowment/goodwill advertisements/subscriptions to enable the Trust to undertake infrastructure development, to widen the scope of its activities on the digital platform, and gain greater visibility for its activities including *The Book Review*.

The Trustees of The Book Review Literary Trust therefore appeal to individuals and organizations to support this venture and help fulfil their aspirations for the Trust.

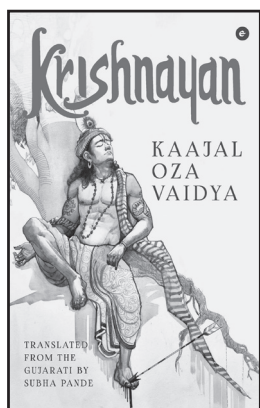
the interest of the reader. It succeeds in doing this by maintaining a fine balance between the familiar and the foreign. Even though translation as an activity is an indispensable experience in a multilingual country like India, every act of literary translation especially from an Indian language into English, a language separated in time, place, and implicated in colonial history, invariably places the translator face to face with questions of translatability, both political and artistic. A discussion around this is what I found missing in the otherwise comprehensive introduction of this much-needed volume.

Dhumketu himself was a translator who brought Kahlil Gibran, Rabindranath Tagore and western writers to Gujarati. It is only right and just that his works should now be available to the world outside Gujarat through such translations. It is through these translations, the versions of our different cultures, that we are saved from the danger of a monolithic narrative. I would conclude with the translator's own words from an interview, 'translation isn't simply about bringing old stories to new audiences. It's also about preserving, elevating, and celebrating our literary diversity and our languages. Doing so can only help us understand, appreciate, and be more tolerant of our cultural differences.'

Pratishtha Pandya, an Ahmedabad-based poet and translator largely working across Gujarati and English, is the author of *అలల...* (*lalala...*, Navjeevan Samprat). She works with People's Archive of Rural India (PARI). She also writes, edits, and works on the culture section of PARI, and also coordinates their team of Gujarati translators. She has taught at the undergraduate level for more than 10 years.

Book News

Book News



Krishnayan by Kaajal Oza Vaidya is stitched together with what Rukmini, Satyabama, Draupadi and Radha meant to Krishna. It is at once vivid, intense and also tender, but not for a moment weighed down by sentimentality.

Indisputably the biggest bestseller of all time in Gujarati literature—having sold over 200,000 copies and gone into more than twenty-eight editions.

Eka, an imprint of Westland Books, 2021, pp. 270, ₹499.00

Alternative Readings of Sita's Story

Umesh Kumar

THE LIBERATION OF SITA

By Volga. Translated from the original Telugu by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree
Harper Perennial, 2018, pp. 127, ₹250.00

Greg Salyer (2017), in his lecture 'Myth and Hinduism', attempts to create an archeology of myth by defining it at three levels. Firstly, he understands 'myth' (in the lowercase) as a false story. In popular culture, especially in social media, we perhaps use it the most. The often-used phrase 'myth-busting' covers some aspects of this definition. Secondly, Myth (in uppercase)—as a particular set of stories, say, for instance: Greek Myth, Roman Myth and so on. And thirdly, Salyer defines MYTH (in all upper cases) to be a story that a culture tells itself; which by definition is true. He equates it with a song that one listens to continuously but can't sing and can't help listening. In other words, MYTH, asserts Salyer, is the deeper level, where it is true. And yet another theoretician Joseph Campbell gives a novel turn to this conceptualization when he argues that 'stories aren't the end of the story.' In other words, stories are also pointers to something that can't be articulated but experienced—like that ever-reverberating song to which Salyer alludes.

Subverting Valmiki's Ramayana, Volga, in her *The Liberation of Sita*, excavates a few such pointers in an attempt to reopen an old discourse and its missing links. Here, we have a set of five stories accompanying Sita as the connecting link. The other characters are: Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, Urmila, and Rama. Barring Rama, the popular tale doesn't provide much individualizing detail about these four (female) characters. While negotiating the popular Ramayana, a discerning reader would be left wondering about the fate of these women, once they are subjected to the 'moments of crises' in their lives. To simplify further, the popular version doesn't tell what happens to Surpanakha once Lakshmana disfigures her face; how does Ahalya make sense of her life after coming back to life by Rama's touch; what life lessons does Renuka imbibe after being beheaded by her own son; how does Urmila feel after being abandoned by her husband and so on. Instead of providing

a resolution to the predicament of these characters, the popular version attempts to deliberately forget them. Jaaware (2019) terms this forgetting as instances of ethical and political destitution and argues, 'Because storytelling has the ability to terminate the telling at crucial points of ethical and political "destitution", it provides a special opportunity to abandon the narrative at an ethical conundrum or even an aporia' (p. 7).

Still, central to all these destitutions is the predicament of Sita, which paves the way for her to be a *Vimukta* (*The Liberated One*) after she renounces everything and becomes one with Mother Earth. Strangely, the popular narrative remains silent about the background that prepares Sita to display such a monumental strength of character, especially, in the wake of having a conditional offer of returning to the palace. After all, the decision to abandon her children would not have been that easy for Sita. It is at this juncture that Volga pitches in and formulates that Sita's strength of character is derived from other destitute characters—Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila. Volga seems to be arguing that liberation is more a collective exercise than individual. The cooperative pursuits of sisterhood (an important feminist concept) among these women translate destitution into liberation.

The first story is titled 'Reunion'. It accounts for the first meeting of Sita and Surpanakha after the latter's humiliation and mutilation at the hands of Lakshmana. In Sita's understanding, seeking love was Surpanakha's only 'crime'. In her conversation, Surpanakha proposes an alternative vision of life. Bereft of hatred, anger, and vengeance against her tormenters, she develops a vision of beauty that transcends the individual physical attributes. She now believes in becoming one with nature (an early intimation of Sita becoming one with Mother Earth) by developing a beautiful garden of her own. The conversation leaves little doubt in Sita's mind that Surpanakha has risen above the material existence by becoming inseparable from the beauty and harmony of nature. Sita realizes that true liberation is not clinging to human relations but in a subtle withdrawal from them.

'The Music of Earth' retells Ahalya's story from her perspective, a right denied to her in the popular narrative. Here, Sita meets her twice and also hears about her from Rama and Kausalya. The initial seed of conflict is sown in Sita's mind when Rama and Kausalya have a contrasting assessment of Ahalya's character. While



narrating her story Rama uses the phrase 'lack of character' (p. 19) whereas Kausalya calls her a woman of 'noble character' (p. 22). Through Kausalya, Sita realizes that the way women understand fellow women could be drastically different from the way men understand them. She learns the monopoly men have achieved over matters of pollution, cleanliness, purity, honour, dishonour, and selective usage of these concepts against women. During their conversation, Ahalya doesn't focus on the question of women's fidelity or the violation of it but the power in the man's hand to control or supervise it. Sita does not understand Ahalya fully until she is forced to prove her chastity by undergoing a trial by fire. Quite cleverly, Volga is able to create obvious parallels between Sita and Ahalya's lives here. Both are subjected to humiliation and insult without being given a chance to explain their side. Later, when Rama abandons pregnant Sita in the forest, she realizes the value of Ahalya's prophecy, '...All men are the same, Sita' (p. 31). In other words, the encounters with Ahalya teach Sita to seek her salvation not through Rama but beyond him.

'The Sand Pot', the third story, is an insightful discussion regarding a woman's relationship with her husband, sons, and her *paativratyam* (fidelity). With a running metaphor of the sand pot, which she sculpts, Renuka argues about the fluid nature of the just mentioned three associations in a woman's life. They can go for a toss anytime. A slight lapse in concentration is enough. Renuka's crime was a momentary desire (in thought, not in action) for another man. It was reason enough for her husband to order her killing. In a fraction of a second, the bond of a husband-wife, mother-son bites the dust, like a sand pot popping out

suddenly from someone's hands. Renuka cautions Sita against the patriarchal affinity of sons. One witnesses Renuka's advice at work when Sita abandons her maternal instincts before becoming one with Mother Earth.

'The Liberated', the title story, recounts the life experiences of Urmila. They prove to be the catalyst for Sita's own liberation too. After being abandoned by Lakshmana, Urmila undertakes a journey of self-discovery through her stern observance of solitude. Sita is the first person that Urmila speaks to after fourteen years. Sharing the fruits of her penance, Urmila counsels Sita about the overarching influence of power in human life. The conversation reveals the high moral fibre of Urmila's character.

Volga's alternative reading of Sita's story unpacks new vistas of interpretation. One of the dangers in a revisionist MYTH-making is a writer's temptation to turn the story upside down which might put off the readers. One of the possible reasons for the anguish of readers on such occasions is that they already know the characters too well. Volga avoids such temptations. Instead, she focuses on the cracks in the storyline and attempts to fill the voids organically. Her treatment of Sita's story is subversive yet acceptable; bold yet empathetic.

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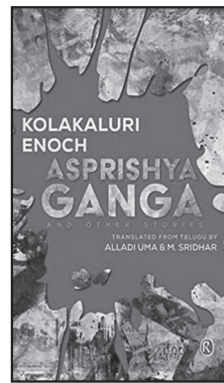
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Book News

Book News



Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories by Kolakaluri Enoch, translated from the Telugu by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar, jolts us out of our complacency to ponder over the questions of caste, class and gender; of love, friendship, power games, exploitation

and politics. Through the title story, Enoch brings out the relationship between the Ganga, the revered river and the water in the well of the 'untouchable'.

Ratna Books, 2021, pp. 256, ₹449.00

The Last Journey, Ever Lasting Questions

VS Sreedhara

KARYA

By Aravind Malagatti. Translated from the original Kannada by Susheela Punitha
Penguin/Hamish Hamilton, India, 2021, pp .176, ₹399.00

Aravind Malagatti is a prolific Kannada writer with more than seventy books to his credit, covering a wide range of genres. His *Government Brahmana*, the first Dalit autobiography in Kannada (1994) and brought out in English under the same title (2007), received wide acclaim for its sensitive and nuanced account of Dalit life. The title is an ironic reference to the way in which Dalits were chided as the neo-privileged, but Malagatti turns derogation into a tool of protest and assertion.

Dalit literature in Kannada, as elsewhere in India, emerged along with Dalit movement that took a distinct shape during the late 70s. However, in Karnataka, Bandaya Sahitya (protest literature) also emerged at the same time and they shared several common concerns. Together they rejected the excessive celebration of the individual by Kannada modernity—the Navya movement—and its penchant for the exploration of the self, divorced from social conditions and upbringing. Dalit/Bandaya writing ushered in fresh experiments in content and form. It questioned the authority that held the power structure of caste and economic exploitation intact; it critiqued the very notion of excellence in literature and tried to argue in favour of developing a new poetics to locate the new writing in its historical context. Aravind Malagatti, like other prominent writers of his time like Siddalingaiah, Devanuru Mahadeva, KB Siddaiah, K Ramaiah and others, was a product of that time. Both his creative and critical works reflect these concerns.

Karya, published in 1988 and his only novel, is pivoted on the events that unfold when the ceremonial journey to the grave undertaken three days after the death of a Dalit woman gets disturbed throwing the whole community into a stasis. Unable to bear the heat, the community head carrying the fire pot lets it down, thereby breaking it and the custom. Considered inauspicious,