

THE BOOK REVIEW

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of the birds that was in harmony with the sunlight' (p. 59). Janakiraman has striking images: to quote just one example, 'Gopali shrank back from her flattery as if a prickly caterpillar had crawled all over him' (p. 122).

The narrative has immediacy, as if Ammani is *talking* to us, the readers. As a little child, she remembers being unable to control her laughter when an uncle of hers died. 'That was when I was a child. If you ask me, it is pretty much the same now. I feel like laughing not only at death or marriage but at everything' (p. 4). By the end of the novel, we realize that laughter is Ammani's defence mechanism against the world. She mocks at hypocrisy of any kind, whether it is the silk sari clad Marxists who lecture people in the slums, or 'a man who flies to a khadi meeting in Delhi and talks with his eyes glued to my bosom' (p. 189).

The characters are built up through small details. In the first chapter, Ammani describes the enthralling beauty of Gopali's singing, but also recounts his comment when (years later) she tells him about a singer in Hungary who had a voice like his, 'Was she pretty? How old was she?' (p. 9). And the reader gets a hint of what to expect when Gopali sees the beautiful Maragadham. The novelist presents twenty-year-old Ammani's encounter with the forty-seven-year-old Gopali with great sensitivity. Gopali talks as if he remembers her from his visits to Annavasal, but Ammani realizes 'it was all a lie' (p. 44). 'He called me "child", but his arms weren't hugging me like I was one, though I couldn't say for sure. I edged away and looked up. The body and the eyes that had foolishly embraced me were no longer there. I could only see the sublime ecstasy with which he sang, obliterating all the people sitting in front of him' (p. 45).

The minor characters are well etched; Pachappan and Maragadham with their steadfast devotion to each other represent the moral centre of the novel and make Ammani rethink about marriage. Ammani's mother is the typical orthodox villager, unable to understand Ammani's desire for education. Her Periamma and Periappa (he has studied only till the 6th class) support her when she wants to go to college, they love her more

“An outstanding feature of the novel is Ammani's sensuous apprehension of life. Janakiraman captures the sights, sounds and smells of whatever Ammani sees.”

than her own parents. However, Ammani in the second part is not quite credible, with bizarre declarations like, 'I wish to live with all the men in the world like a wife, if only for a moment' (p. 135); 'Not only Maragadham. There were countless other girls too who lived within me...girls from all over the world were inside me. I experienced the orgasm and the pain on behalf of all of them' (p. 164).

Wooden Cow is a triumph of translation; Lakshmi Kannan captures the ambience of rural and urban Tamil Nadu without peppering the narrative with words from the original language. She uses Tamil words like *arasilai* and *dharbai* (with a glossary) only because there are no equivalents in English. Her eight-page note, 'A dappled deer or a growling leopard' discusses the problems of translation; her interaction with Janakiraman reveals the personal side of the writer. Anita Balakrishnan's introduction, 'The Cadence of Life', discusses the main themes of his work.

Janakiraman's delineation of a woman's sexuality fifty years ago won him the reputation of an iconoclast. His exposé of society's hypocrisy, pretensions and double standards is still very relevant. Characters like Maragadham, Periappa and Periamma are memorable.

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Book News

Book News



Sin: Stories by Wajida Tabassum, one of the most prominent names in Urdu literature, an iconoclast and non-conformist often referred to as the 'female Manto', is set in Hyderabad's old-world aristocratic society of the

1950s. This stellar collection of stories, featuring lascivious nawabs, lustful begums, cunning servants, and unfulfilled marriages marked by peculiar rituals and customs, showcases Tabassum's boldest short stories, alongside the story of her own life, translated for the first time into English.

Hachette, 2022, pp. 240, ₹499.00

Of Her Time, and Ours Too: Mannu Bhandari's Fiction

Umesh Kumar

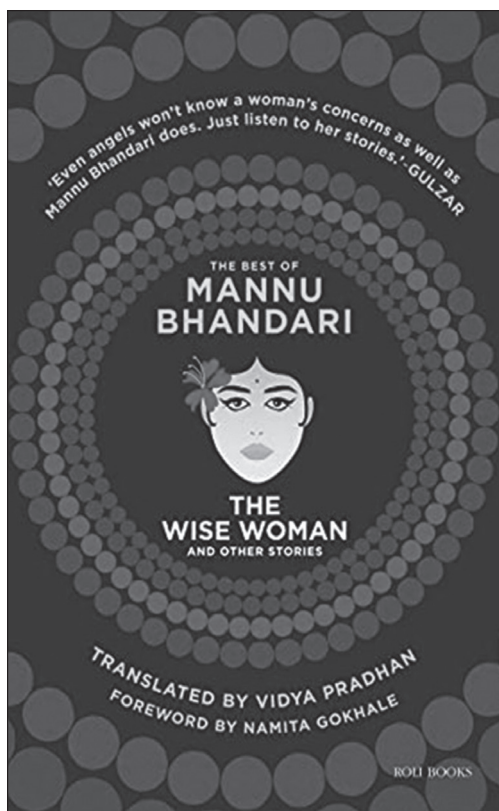
THE WISE WOMAN AND OTHER STORIES: THE BEST OF MANNU BHANDARI

Translated from the original Hindi by Vidya Pradhan with a Foreword by Namita Gokhale
Indialnk, an imprint of Roli Books, 2021, pp. 248, ₹395.00

Anton Chekhov, analysing the structural elements of a short story, says, 'writing a short story, therefore, is to write what the characters do, not what they think, or say' (Friedland 1890). While there is no autobiographical evidence of Chekhov's influence on Mannu Bhandari's artistic development, one can see a Chekovian resonance, a kind of literary parallel. In Vidya Pradhan's rich selection of eighteen stories under review, Bhandari's characters do negotiate things as they exist. Her narrative canvas substitutes abstract philosophizing with lived realities.

Mannu Bhandari (1931–2021) is a well-known writer even outside Hindi, with her meaningful contribution to the Nayi Kahani (new story) movement and through adaptation of her writing in theatre and on the celluloid. Nonetheless, *The Wise Woman* carries a highly readable foreword by Namita Gokhale. A crucial trend in Nayi Kahani is to examine the reigning cultural ethos of India's rising middle-class. Bhandari's favourite object of inquiry against this backdrop is the (dynamic) position of women, set against changing social mores. Characterizing her (women) characters as individuals, Bhandari brings to the fore their aspirations, anxieties, frustrations, self-centredness, insecurities, and a plethora of other concerns in the rapidly changing world. Without wrapping her character into any flag or ism, Bhandari manages to create humanized personas that won't be rendered obsolete anytime soon. She is a product of her time and still timeless. On top of that, she uses very simple, subtle and delicate Hindi to create her characters. This anthology is yet another example that for Bhandari, language is just a medium—neither an end nor an obstacle. However, an alert reader will notice that there is a powerful strain of undercover deception in her linguistic simplicity.

'This is Truth' is a highly anthologized story in Hindi. The predicament of Deepa,



who is entangled in an archetypal love triangle, taps the inner turmoil of the protagonist where she must choose between her current lover and the ex. Bhandari maintains her signature 'passionless neutrality', remaining non-judgemental throughout. A few other stories such as 'The Actor', 'The Tale of a Weak Girl', 'Eyeglasses', 'Fake Diamonds' not only re-examine the overarching influence of love in human life but also expose its incomprehensible nature. The emotion of love appears in dissimilar, often in contradictory ways, in these stories.

In 'Trishanku', Bhandari mocks the fault lines of liberal thinking. In 'The Lonely', Somabua's suffering is heartbreaking though she makes desperate attempts to hide it. The story proves, yet again, that the biggest gift human beings desire and are also capable of giving each other is attention. Bhandari has an uncanny knack of looking beneath the surface. She lays bare the fluctuating fortunes of middle-class women. In 'The New Job', Rama gives up her job so that her husband's ambitious career can be sustained. The title story, 'The Wise Woman' is often evoked in Hindi circles for its epigrammatic capital. Laced with newly acquired wisdom, gained through her liaison with a married man, the protagonist advises her fellow sisters: 'If you are a married woman, by all means have a romance with a married man. When you get bored you can always go back home' (p. 146).

The Wise Woman is an amazing collection translated brilliantly by Vidya Pradhan. The translation succeeds in replicating the economy of expression for which Bhandari

is known. It is mainly through her economy and honesty of expression that Bhandari has carved a niche for the 'everyday' in her stories. Pradhan has preserved all that is essential Bhandari. The translator is effortlessly faithful in her English rendering. However, 'this safety valve of faithfulness' is a little annoying when Hindi phrases and idioms are literally (casually?) translated. For example, the original title of the first story is '*Yehi Sach Hai*'. There are at least three translation possibilities: 'This is Truth' (Pradhan's translation), 'Only This is Truth', 'Such is Truth'. To me, the third option suits more to the 'existential tonality' of the story and to its open-ended stance. Similarly, '*Stree Subodhini*' translated as 'The Wise Woman' misses both the irony and the paradox created by Bhandari. There are many sentences carrying unnecessary semantic surplus. For instance, 'If you close your eyes for a second you cannot tell if you are in the Tea House or *outside* on the footpath' (p. 91, italics mine). The italicized word could have been omitted at the editing stage. 'A Storm in a Teacup' has a few characters who use English in their conversation, a deliberate ploy by Bhandari to underline class divisions. The translator could have kept those utterances in italics because of their critical value. Pradhan has unnecessarily improved on such utterances and does a disservice to the plot by putting them as running sentences. There are many such niggles and hope they are taken care of in future editions.

However, Pradhan achieves great excellence in the course of her translations. For instance, the way she handles the word 'negro' from the original (p. 92) shows her sensitivity. Having said that, the potency of this already commendable anthology might have shone forth much brighter had the translator added a 'proper' introduction. It was also intriguing not to have a grounded translator's note.

Overall, the book has been produced very well and has a splendid cover. Once encountered, the stories are going to stay with the reader forever.

Works Cited:

Friedland, Louis S. Ed. *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*. New York: Minton, 1924.

Umesh Kumar, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, is a literary translator and works with the following language pairs: Hindi-Marathi: English, either way. His most recent translation is Ramdash Mishra's award-winning poetry collection *The Laughing Flames and Other Poems* (Sahitya Akademi, 2021).

'A Build up to a Dynamic Symphony'?

Malashri Lal

YEARBOOK OF INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH, 2020-2021

Edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal
Hawakal Publishers, New Delhi & Kolkata, 2021,
pp. 256, ₹600.00

The task of a poetry editor is both exciting and onerous. The most difficult genre to 'judge' for quality, poetry's intimate and earnest vocabulary defies any fixed norms. While each poet is supremely individual, so is each reader, and therefore literary responses can be highly subjective. Nevertheless, if the incremental interest in this genre is to be systematized for public circulation, editors have to make choices within the amplitude confronting them. Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agrawal, editors of the *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English, 2020-2021* have fulfilled their task admirably though it is a specially difficult year when the pandemic has thrown up poetry as a favoured instrument of self-healing.

At a first glance into the contents, one is amazed by the diversity of voices presented even though the language is English. The postcolonial 'writing back to the Empire' has now changed to confidently displaying sparkling innovations in the English language which is freely related to regional expressions. For example, '*ghutan*' is an emotive term for pandemic-induced 'suffocation'. This hardly needs further explanation and the vernacular is used most successfully: 'This season, I am told, / even the mango trees are heavy with ghutan' (K Srilata). Another word, '*Pagri*' / turban, has numerous connotations of tradition, legacy and honour that are dramatically explored by Kashiana Singh as a metaphor for poetry, showing the English syntax stretching like the crisp cotton fabric of her father's headgear. As Sukrita and Vinita emphasize in the Introduction, 'The journey commenced in search of our own English which has negotiated with the rich repertoire

“...one must remember that

the *Yearbook* chose not to be theme based. Poets appear in alphabetical order...”