

Prize Catch

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HE Katha Awards for the best short story in different languages (12 this year) have become an annual feature. Selected by respected writers and scholars in each language, there's a distinguished panel of translators too. Presumably, the nominating editors have access to all (or most of) the stories written in a language. Certainly, it's a pleasure for us to be able to read some of the stories in other languages which we might otherwise have had to do without. I was happy to see that footnotes were used sparingly, the assumption being that many of the words and terms used in one Indian language would be understood, when used in their context, by those who know another Indian language. A minor point, but I did miss the language of each story being given in the contents or the title-page of each story.

The stories themselves offer us an exciting, sometimes disturbing, vision of the complex fabric that is India. From the massacre of bonded labourers in a faraway village; the endless holocaust envisioned in Gopinath Mohanty's story 'Shikar' (translated from Oriya by Sachidananda Mohanty and Sudhakar Marathe); to the extraordinary life of a woman who gives up everything to save a river from destruction, ... in Milind Bokil's 'Thirsting for Water' (translated from Marathi by Asha Damle and Arvind Dixit); nominated by Vijaya Rajadhyaksha). As Gopinath Mohanty says in 'Shikar', talking of the power of imagination to enable us to divine the unseen past, people we've never met, as so many of these stones do: "He could not relate gunfire with this peaceful forest and his vision of their primal life... very easily, effortlessly, this picture arose before his eyes, touching him like an invisible wind. Like a radio catching a tune from afar, Man's imagination has given body to images of fields and cattle, peasants and labourers. Not through bloodshed, not through gunfire." But through the remarkable powers of imagination and sympathy we enter into the lives of others. Sometimes this imagination is quirky, its power to

weld disparate elements used to bring utterly different creatures and images together. Three remarkable stories do just this.

Rukun Advani's 'Death by Music' (in English, nominated by Nissim Ezekiel) and two in Malayalam: M.T. Vasudevan Nair's 'Little Earthquakes' (translated by D Krishna Ayyar and Raji Subramaniam) and 'Higuita' by N. S. Madhavan, (translated and selected by Sujatha Devi). Vasudevan Nair's wonderful, undying *Muttashi*, who sprouts wings, and flies, even in the face of death is evidence of the magic transcendence of the imagination. So also is Rukun Advani's Elizabeth Taylor, who steps right off the screen to merge with the everyday, with a woman long dead during the Mutiny, the triumph of desire over death; this, in Rukun Advani's stylish and evocative prose. N.S. Madhavan's Goalkeeper, who becomes

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Jesus, who becomes Father Geevarghese, who saves a helpless young prostitute from her tormentor pimp, is another flower of the imagination, reality imbued with magic.

A modern day Lear is found suffering the cruelty of his only daughter in the deeply moving and memorable story 'The Fig Tree Stands Witness' by Shyamal Gangopadhyay (nominated by Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay and translated from Bengali by Shampa Banerjee). Who could forget the image of the old man "who looked like a stork", left alone in a train to nowhere? Manju Kak's 'Blessed are My Sons' (nominated by Nissim Ezekiel) is filled with a humour and vitality rare in women writers. Her capacity for fantasy catapults her into sympathetic understanding of the lustful impotence of a butcher, and, tangentially, into the painful cir-



cutousness of the man-woman relationship. Asha Bage's Marathi story 'Toofan', is the complex story of desire and longing in the life of an unfulfilled and aging woman. (This story was nominated by Vijaya Rajadhyaksha, and translated by Arvind Dixit). The almost repetitious accumulation of detail deadens one in a sinister way, making the inner and outer storm that follows all the more fearful.

'A Day Scared by a Kinsman' (nominated by D. R. Nagaraj), translated from the Kannada original by Padma Sharma) is a story by Vaidehi, of ambivalent feelings, and disgust, gradually exposed to the writer herself, like a wound or a scar not noticed before. Sophisticated in style, yet raw in emotion, Vaidehi's writing is suggestive, rather than explicit, leaving us with images of "drowning girls, hands flailing, endlessly beckoning, sucked in until only the fingertips showed.... mouths open yet unable to call ... eyes, dying behind window bars." Vivek Shanbag's 'Each Unto His Own' (translated from Kannada by Ramachandra Sharma) is about how two very different kinds of women react to the injustice and cruelty offered to them through the ages. Subrabharatimanian's Tamil story 'Space', (nominated by Sundara Ramaswamy and translated by S. K. Shanti, has a profound point to make, about the claustrophobia and anger that spring from a lack of space and privacy.

A beautifully told and gripping tale of love and doom is 'Like Lightning in the Skies' (nominated by Gopi Chittoor Narang, and translated from Urdu by M. Asaduddin)

Manju Kak). Another fine story told in the conventional mode yet memorable, because of its truth and wisdom is 'Satyadas' (nominated by Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, and translated from Bengali by Enakshi Chatterjee) Bhupen Khakhar's Gujarati story 'Pages from a Diary' (nominated and translated by Ganesh N. Devy), gives us an artist's fleeting glimpse, or portrait, of a certain kind of Lalajee, with just a few brush strokes. There are two stories about animals of a different ilk. Atulananda Goswami's 'The Rogue' (nominated by Pankaj Thakur and translated by the author) speak of man's cruelty to wild animals. Mohan Parmar's 'Wado: The Yard' (nominated by Ganesh N. Devy and translated by Anjana Desai) is about a man's obsessive tear of a mongoose, though it was difficult to quite get the point of this story. The short story may encompass all sort of ideas within its small space. Jayanto Han's Tamil story, 'Eternal Recurrence' (nominated by Sundara Ramaswamy, translated by M. Vijayalakshmi) is about the modern western-oriented intellectual's impact on an old Nambudiri's intuitive understanding of the Universe - the Eternal Recurrence Theory.

The short story may embody poetic vision too. As in Dhruva Shukla's 'Hide and Seek', (nominated by Nirmal Verma and translated from Hindi by Gillian Wright). The game of hide and seek, played by his two little girls, leads the writer to reflect upon the perennial hide and seek of all existence. The game becomes a metaphor for our human condition, and that, of course, is what the short story might be at its best: a metaphor for the larger, unknown, undiscovered story.

Katha story collections not only act as incentives to short story writers, but also offer evidence that these writers, with their sensitivity, imagination and inventiveness, are enlarging the borders and possibilities of this genre in India.