

A Thematic Study of Lakshmi Kannan's Select Poems

P. Murugesan, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., SET., (Ph.D.)

Lakshmi Kannan

The present study focuses on Lakshmi Kannan, a bilingual writer, who has penned on some common Indian subjects with lucid and free style. She has taken on variety of subjects with keen observation and given importance to trivialities. She has touched every field of literature and is widely known. Hailing from Mysore, she is aware of audience and readership. She is well-versed with cultural and regional settings. All her poems are simple, thought provoking, reminding of our heritage and culture. It symbolizes how common things can get importance and significance. It is lucid and scrupulously honest with a gentle and conversational tone.

Unquiet Waters

The constructive and revolutionary modernism in Lakshmi Kannan's poems have two modes of expression: (i) one turning inward going on one's "voyage within"; (ii) an ironic observation of reality, in "voyage without". *Unquiet Waters*, a volume of her poems, mainly showcases mortality, family relationships and their networks, rivers and river myths and feminine consciousness.

Focus of This Study

The present study intends to examine some of the themes inherent in the collection of poems. Though the underlying themes are in tandem with the familiar modern Indian poetic tradition, Lakshmi Kannan has treated the themes like myth, irony and feminine consciousness with a new outlook.

Ekadanta

What makes a poet belong to a particular country necessarily involves nationality and his/her identity is to be found in being rooted in the soil. Lakshmi Kannan is deeply rooted in the Indian soil. Regional rituals, cultural symbols and myths show her sense of traditions and culture of the land. She invokes God Ganesha in "Ekadanta", a mythical spirit who blesses all beginnings.

“Ekadanta” is a poem centered on lord Ganesha. The title itself gives an idea of what is going to be conveyed. “Ekadanta” is a Sanskrit word. “Eka” means single and “danta” means stick. The word stick can be assumed here as her pen. She is humble and simple in this poem. She touches on fallibility and infallibility. By touching on this, she has proved to be a human known for fallacies.

An elephant takes everything through its trunk and does not allow its trunk to take rest. So also, human beings watch things happening around. Perfect and imperfect things are penned down and given colours. There may be many wrong things while writing or interpreting.

Lakshmi Kannan seems to suggest that any shortcomings in her writing or interpreting must be absolved like an elephant trying to hide the tusk with its trunk. She prays that her clouded phrases, weak passages should be cleared over. This fallibility can be compared to elephant’s body where its tusk is in no way connected to its body proportion. There is a line, “but I do carry you everywhere with me”, where she demands protection and forgiveness as she is loyal to Him:

You were there
curling your trunk over my happy phrases
you were there
lending a lambent glow to an idea
breathing life into the voices on the page
flowing through my pen to give me words
from a mnemonic promptuary.
You were there
in the images they called lovely
in the lines they found powerful
in the ellipses that were limned in light.
You made them so.

Yet equally, you were there
wrapping your trunk over my inept phrases
clouding over a failed idea,
breathing confusion
over the tone of voices
calcifying words that turned brittle.

You were there
in the images they called trite
in the lines they found weak
in the passages that were prosy
Did you make them so?
I don’t know,
but I do carry you everywhere with me.

Who but you
could forgive my fallibility?
You, with the single tusk in your elephant head,
unmatched with the rest of the body,
your dear imperfect form
you will someday absolve me from words
as I search for the aphonic realm. (ll. 1-32)

Visarjan

“Visarjan”, another poem, in which Lakshmi Kannan talks about the sending off lord Ganesha, the lord of *ganas*, through an immersion ceremony in the waters. She wonders herself and raises a question, “How can the lord of *ganas* early dissolve himself with some flowers and *kusa* grass as His parting gifts in the water?” She tries to dissolve herself to escape from the harsh realities of being a human but fails. Her body is not melting down and remains stubbornly solid. She questions herself about her being:

He was the formidable
Lord of the *ganas*
yet he went down easily
in the waters.
Just as easily, he dissolved
his earthy form, sending up afloat
a few flowers, and *kusa* grass,
his parting gifts.
I’ve dived in and out
of the same river,
my body unmelting,
stubbornly solid.

Would I ever learn
from him to dissolve, to mix
the earth of my being
with the waters? (ll. 8-23)

Lakshmi Kannan prefers to give more importance to beings and objects around us. One can find the unquestionable, unconquered place of nature and the like in the poems of Lakshmi. Conus Gloriamaris, large, spiral shell of a conch, a marine mollusk, Goddess Meenakshi’s Parrot, Kolam drawing, a wood rose, a sea sweep, untimely rain, and childhood days take a role to play through her poems.

Feministic Outlook

Lakshmi Kannan’s outlook is feministic in general. Many of her poems stand as example to prove the statement. She is a feminist and she states that many of her friends are women. She

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018
Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature

P. Murugesan, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., SET., (Ph.D.)
A Thematic Study of Lakshmi Kannan’s Select Poems

is very much against the gender bias. She recalls some of the feminist's phrases to describe woman's body as "biology's destiny". She tries to compare and even give a synonymous meaning "human rights" to the term "feminism". In the interview she says:

To me, at this point of time, it has become synonymous with "human rights". It has become as basic as that. Since I have got used to voice and articulate a woman's point of view with as much clarity as I could muster. I feel that it has become a grounding in my psyche, so I find myself doing it for a man too. When a man is oppressed, it comes in to my man centered stories like 'Maze'-or when a man is vulnerable – like in one of my stories 'Zeroing in', it was received very well in Cambridge by most of the men because it shows the terrible situation of man in his workplace – I feel for them. So, I find it is enlarging. "Feminism is human rights".
(72)

Sympathy for the Suffering People

Her sympathy is for anybody who suffers and as a result there are poems like "Don't wash – For Rasha Sundari Debi", "O, For Shame" "Family Tree", "Good Blood/Bad Blood", "Un-housed" and "Assented Burial".

"Don't wash – For Rasha Sundari Debi" is a fine poem which is an example of showing Lakshmi Kannan as a humanist. She needs to expose that women must be given the chance of being educated. This poem is for and on Rasha Sundari Debi who was born in 1810. She wrote the first autobiography in Bangla titled *Amar Jiban* (My life). She lived during the times when literacy was denied to women because of a deep-rooted superstition that a woman who reads or as much as touches a book, will be widowed. Rasha Sundari Debi tore a page from the book *Chaitanya Bhagavata* when her husband left it in the kitchen for a moment. She also stole a palm leaf used by her son for writing. Then she compared the two, learnt the syllables of the languages on her own by writing on the walls of her kitchen, by matching the letters she saw with the sounds she heard. Her autobiography was acclaimed for its lucid and readable prose.

The poem is very much appealing, and one can easily feel both Rasha Sundari Debi and Lakshmi Kannan's feelings of having education:

No, don't.
Don't ever clean with water
the dark, sooty walls
of your kitchen, Rasha Sundari.

For the *akshara* which you scratched
on the walls so furtively,
the *akshara* you tried to match
With the sounds you heard

they've quickened now, with life.

Even as you wash rice, fish, vegetables,
even as you peel, cut, bake, stir and cook
the thieving letters on the wall take wings.
They fly down to the palm leaf
you once stole from your son.

See how the letters move
in the eyes of the mind,
then leap over, back to the wall
from the page of *Chaitanya Bhagavata*
you tore from the book,
when no one was looking. (ll. 1-20)

Lucid Poetry, Aware of Pathos

Lakshmi Kannan's poetry is lucid and scrupulously honest. It is traditional, no hyperbole and no hypocrisy. The tone is gentle and conventional. Courage, conviction and honesty are the hallmark of her poems. The usage of words is natural and known to everyone. She uses typical Indian way and uses English as an Indian speaks. It is in this sense that she is a modern Indian English poet.

In truth, she is more aware of the pathos in the life of a common woman playing a very passive role in the tradition-bound society than some of women poets highlighting a different cultural and moral ethos. In Lakshmi Kannan's poetry, one comes across the intensity of passion which renders words irrelevant for articulation. Obviously, silence and not words is the true language of love, and Lakshmi Kannan shows her distaste for the abstract and her preference for the elemental by laying stress on the role of silence as a dramatic device in a poem charged with pulse and power. She cannot say, like Yeats, that "Words alone are certain good", or as Nissim Ezekiel says, "The best poets wait for words."

Works Cited

"A Dialogue with Lakshmi Kannan". Litcritt. June-Dec. 1999, Vol.25, pp. 60-73.

Kannan, Lakshmi. Unquiet Waters and Other Poems. New Delhi: Penguin Publishers, 2005.

P. Murugesan

Assistant Professor
Department of English
AVC College (Autonomous)
Mannampandal, Tamilnadu, India
pesamu1979@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:6 June 2018

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature

P. Murugesan, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., SET., (Ph.D.)

A Thematic Study of Lakshmi Kannan's Select Poems