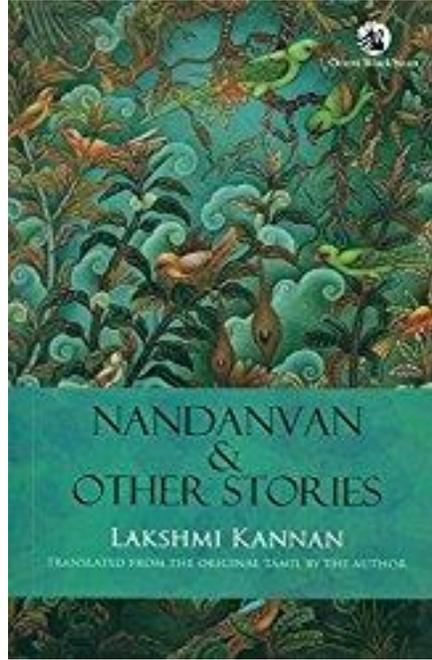


Indian Ethos and Milieu in Lakshmi Kannan's Short Story *Muniyakka*
Dr. M. Soundhararajan



Lakshmi Kannan

This research paper entitled “Indian Ethos and Milieu in Lakshmi Kannan’s Short story *Muniyakka* aims to explore the story as a discourse of Indian Ethos and Milieu. This study also establishes Lakshmi Kannan as a feminist. Lakshmi Kannan is an internationally known bilingual writer, who has written and published long and short fiction in Tamil and in English translation. There are powerful messages, descriptive, and evocative prose, arresting dialogues and soliloquies, incredibly strong never-say-die characters dot the landscape of Lakshmi’s short fictions. Clearly, there is a distinct literary style within which the stories are grounded, that makes Kannan a part of the distinctive genre of postcolonial Indian writers. She brings the sensibility of poetics to her stories, where the resolution sometimes is encapsulated in a single word or metaphor. Her English prose is fluid and the rendering taut.

Lakshmi Kannan’s chiseled prose makes gripping statements and one is struck by the felicity with which she highlights the working of patriarchy in contemporary Indian society. She says what she has to say quietly and effectively and leaves the rest to her reader. She pours scorn not only on age-old self-deceptions but also on new-fangled superficialities. The brittle urban milieu inhabited by simpering socialities is a cause for anger as older prejudices and oppressive practices. Kannan’s fiction makes an earnest attempt to preserve the shrinking domain of

innocence and purity in her both life and relationships. What sets Lakshmi Kannan apart is her seemingly effortless ability to capture the flavour of the Tamil Brahmin milieu. Though critical of the secondary status is accorded to women in Tamil society, she also showcases its liberal outlook in certain instances. Lakshmi Kannan's immaculate grip over her medium is definitely commendable as, it enables her to shift from one realm of human experience to another so seamlessly and effortlessly.



Lakshmi Kannan

Courtesy: <http://archive.jaipurliteraturefestival.org/jlfspeakers/lakshmi-kannan/>

Struggle and Inevitable Pain

Kannan's characters reflect their strength of spirit as they struggle with the inevitable pain of existence, everyday grievances and prejudices, the indomitable will to survive loneliness and sorrow, and the confidence to resolve inner and external conflict. Her protagonists reveal themselves through soliloquies, dialogue, and evocative silences. Her rhythms and idioms of the Tamil world translate into fluid and sensitive prose in English, masterfully retaining the intensity and ethos of the original. The spectrum of experiences and sensibilities depicted in these lucid, probing, and absorbing narrative style. This study highlights how does Muniyakka resist Indian patriarchal society and its Ethos and Milieu.

Muniyakka – Feminism and Fidelity

Lakshmi Kannan's famous story *Muniyakka* treats the issue of gender from an entirely different perspective. It is cast in surrealistic mode. It is a short story feminism which is the other side of the coin of wifely fidelity. The character Muniyakka is from a servant class. Her life story involves strategies to survive, negotiating difficult situations and yet maintaining her selfhood and independence. Being a shrewd woman, because she is illiterate, she has to exercise her native wisdom. She has no one to turn to her husband Bairappa wasted his life and hers. Her sons are "shameless bastards". She has no hesitation in cursing them in her rasping soliloquies, for which she is famous. She is 'The Walkie-Talkie' for the children in the neighbourhood who are amused by her sight. Paradoxically she has a fierce loyalty to her dead husband. she never fails to perform the rituals on his obsequies day. She punctiliously arranges bathe freshly washed banana leaf all the things dear to the departed soul, including a packet of his favourite brand of *beedi* and a bottle of toddy, which she hands to Thimmayya as a ritual offering. She performs the *sbraddha* in her hut meticulously. What is odder is that, on that day, she wears a clean saree, flowers on her hair

and a *blight kumkum* on the brow, her face glowing as if in youth. The inoment the *sbraddha* is done over. she sweeps the hut clean and delivers a sermon on empty human relationships:

'Husband! .. Son! What humbug all these relationships are ... huh!. She is delivered of the bondage, of her servile role. she is now a free spirit. Lakshmi Kannan brilliantly exploits the features of the Gothic to underscore this perception. Muniyakka's lonely hut in the corner of Rao's bungalow is iconographic of her fiercely independent spirit. In the "inky darkness", her hut is surrounded by the coconut grove with its eerie atmosphere, the jackfruit tree, the stormy wind howling through the foliage, the incensed figure of Muniyakka sits, conversing with her favourite ghosts and "devils". They are "being essentially female in their form". Her abject poverty and minimal existence, which is a social detail creating awareness of her class situation, is off-set by her undaunted dancing with the devil. The author succeeds in projecting a supernatural female force out of this famous servant woman Muniyakka, who occupies a prime place in the gallery of female figures Lakshmi has created.

Women's Superstitions

The other aspect of gender critique in the story is Muniyakka's castigation of women's superstitions in propitiating snake idols made of stone in the temple as Fertility Gods, feeding them with milk, decorating them with vermilion and flowers. Muniyakka also serves in the shrine. It is her responsibility to clean up the mess of piety created by the worship after the women leave the premises. She curses them heartily and lambastes them for their foolish beliefs. The author surely exposes the ambivalence of such a folk faith, in ordinary circumstances the snake is feared and distrusted and killed pitilessly but is revered in stone when women pray for a male child. Throughout the story the hooded cobra is a striking image and contributes much to the Gothic ambience.

Gothic Narrative Dealing with Gender Issues

If *Muniyakka* is a quintessential Gothic narrative, dealing with the gender issues of woman as wife, woman as mother, and woman as a free force. we have, at There is the other end of the spectrum, a highly discursive, intellectual story, modern and cosmopolitan in its ethos and mode of writing. Lakshmi Kanrian's keen artistic imagination works discursively.

Dialectics of Woman Being a Woman

This story examines the "dialectics of a woman being a woman, and woman becoming a woman for the sake of men. Its discursive span is quite striking". Thus between "Muniyakka" and "Simone de Beauvoir and the Manes", Lakshmi Kannan has achieved two different realisations of the feminist short story. Lakshmi Kannan brings in her favourite staple character in many of her stories. Muniyakka to strikes at entrenched establishment thinking. The solicitude of the devil that the women really experience a different order of reality.

It is Muniyakka in the story, who firmly turns her back on the dead wood in tradition and encourages the child to be free. She is the alternative image of women set against the traditional archetypes so that Lakshmi projects her as strong, spirited, independent, and rational. Paradoxically enough, she believes in devils, even communes with them, takes direction and

protection from the good devil, “*Olle Pichachi* “against the “assault of the wicked devil” *Kettu Pichachi*.

Her talk and habits and stories are so captivating to the child that she wants to know, 'Muni ... Muniyakka ... you ... who are you? I mean, are you a woman or a devil?' This innocent doubt of the child can be interpreted as the author's challenge to patriarchy and its cultural practices. Muniyakka's answer at once touches the supernatural and rational levels. She tells the child that she can practise sorcery and out-devil the devil, the wicked one. She explains “with a broad grin” that 'we should also have some wickedness within us. Otherwise any rogue will devour us. You must realise that, Surely, it is a lesson in strategy for women to stave off society's attempt to annihilate their self.

Purgatory Function

Lakshmi simply excelled herself in creating this poignant Gothic tale, making a modern institution like hospital her Dantean purgatory. Lakshmi uses the short story form to explore the hidden, dark motivation and drives in the recesses of human consciousness and the unconscious.

Lakshmi Kannan's short stories are an important contribution to contemporary Indian literature. Basically, she draws her characters and voices from the middle class, with which she is conversant. She also has the necessary power of empathy to construe life lived in other material conditions. She is committed to examining issues in feminist ideology and study the functioning of patriarchy in society. But, she is not the one to allegorise human beings into abstract categories and demonise any particular sex or a system, be it the male or the family. Her writings have always been marked by a certain-urbaneness, respect for polyvalence, a genuine concern to resolve problems rather than stand impaled on issues for their own sake. Hence. her critiques of institutional structures have invariably been nuanced and multifaceted. Her art and craft owe much to her sensitivity to language and feelings. Hence, she is a mistress of creating a striking atmosphere and ambience. Her word-horde is amazing from which she quarries most appropriate and revealing expressions. They give texture of poetry to her stories. Her narrative technique and discursive tools are therefore never mechanical. They emerge in consonance with the experiences, she wants to depict. The Indian ethos and idiom are superbly captured in her resonant English.

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Dr. M. Soundhararajan
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English
Annamalai University
Annamalainagar
Tamilnadu
India
apmar9159@gmail.com

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