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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 25: Lakshmi Kannan

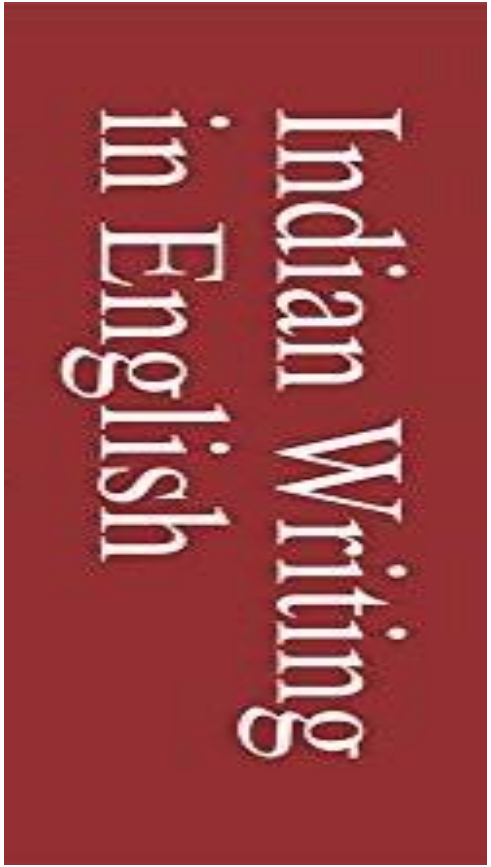
BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Background

- Lakshmi Kannan belongs to the post-Independence era of Indian Writing in English.
- Women were struggling with the forced identity imposed upon them (of being homemaker, wife, mother, breadwinner) by the patriarchal framework.
- This framework negated their individuality, talent, skill and language.
- The influence of Modernity became visible on women writers.
- Women's voices were registered.
- Asserting one's own regional identity became an important task.
- Tamil society of 1960's and 70's became the background of Kannan's writings.



Biographical Details

- Bilingual writer, poet, translator, novelist, short story writer
- Pen name – Kaaveri (on the name of river)
- Born on 13th August 1947 (Mysore)
- Taught at IIT Delhi for several years
- Member of the Poetry Society of India
- Member of the Jury for Commonwealth Writers prize, Eurasia
- Received Manjula Srinivas Award for best women writer in 2012.
- Her stories have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi and many other Indian languages.

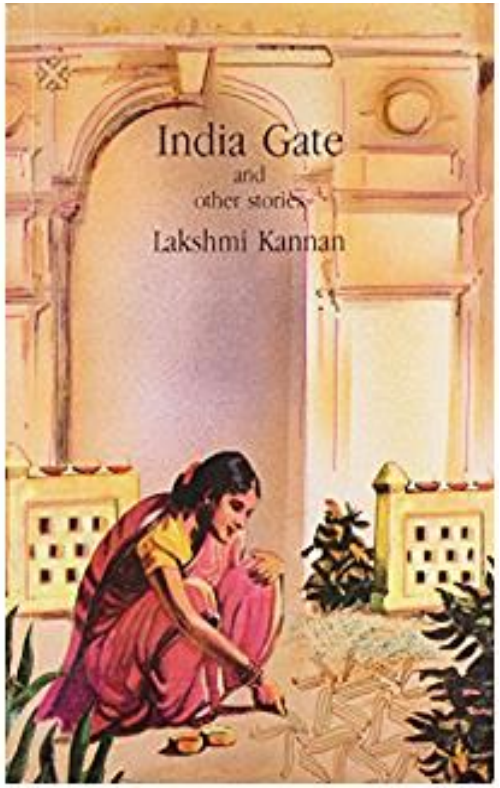
Poetry Collections



- *Impressions* (1974)
- *The Glow And The Grey* (1976)
- *Exiled Gods* (1985)
- *Unquiet Waters* (2005) (edited by Keki N Daruwalla)



Works

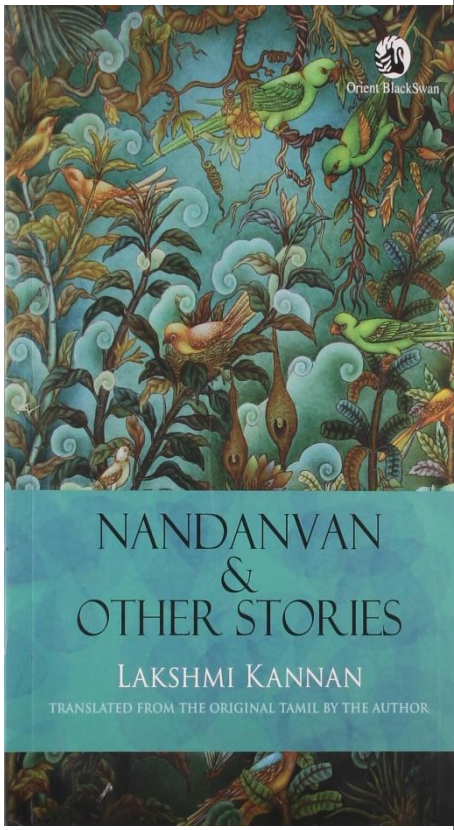


Short Story Collections

- *Rhythm* (1986)
- *Parijata and Other Stories* (1992)
- *India Gate and Other Stories* (1993)
- *Nandavan and Other Stories* (2011)
- *Genesis: Select Stories* (2014)

Novel

- *Going Home* (1998)



General Themes of Her Poetry

- Devotional Poems (*Ekdanta, Visarjana*)
- Feminine Sensibility
- Relationship and Mosaic of romance
- Celebration of ordinary women
- Suffering: External Vs. Internal voice
- Sensuousness and Spiritualism
- Marginalized section of Indian Society (Dalit, Women)
- River and River myths, Indian ritual and culture
- Water and woman fused into one
- Multi-layered existence of woman
- Blend of spirituality underlying Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism.

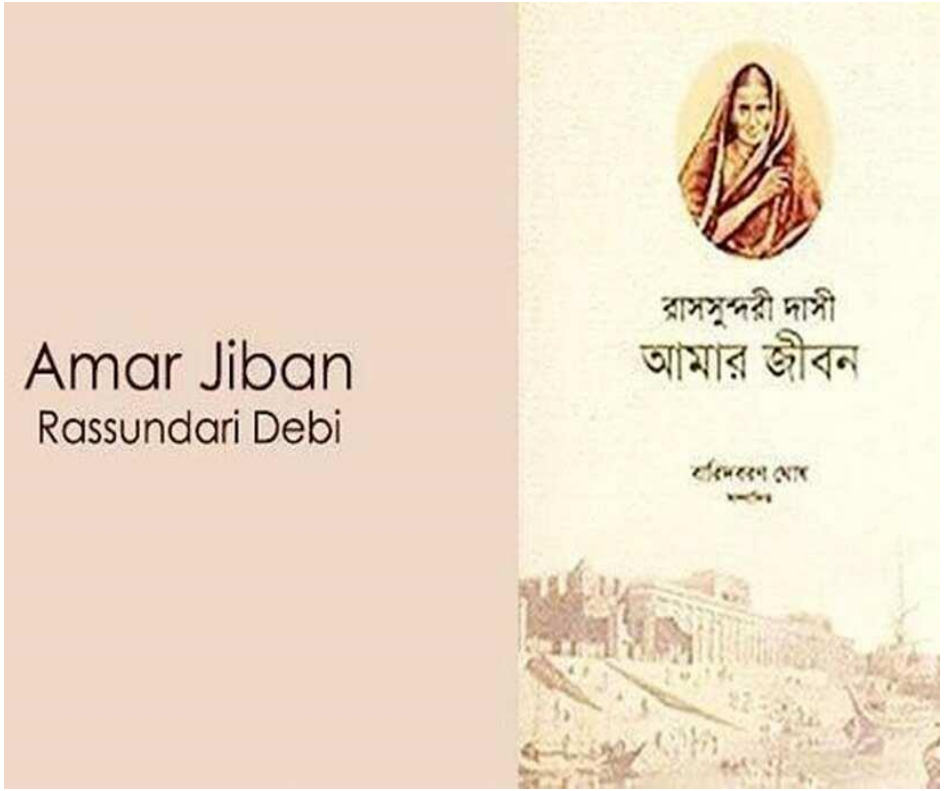
On her Creative Impulse

“ There is a luminous something that glimmers and beckons from a distance. Still in a nascent state, it threatens to dissolve any moment, to merge again in the fleeting, amorphous life around it. It is a point that excites a story to take shape within the crucible of a consciousness that is anxious to capture this ‘something’ in its true lights, in mid-flight as it were. With that begins the lonely, uncertain search of a writer when she decides on how much to tell and how much to hold back unsaid, tossing as she does on the dialectics of a wish to assert herself as a writer, running counter to a more luxurious wish to simply surrender to her subject in silence.”

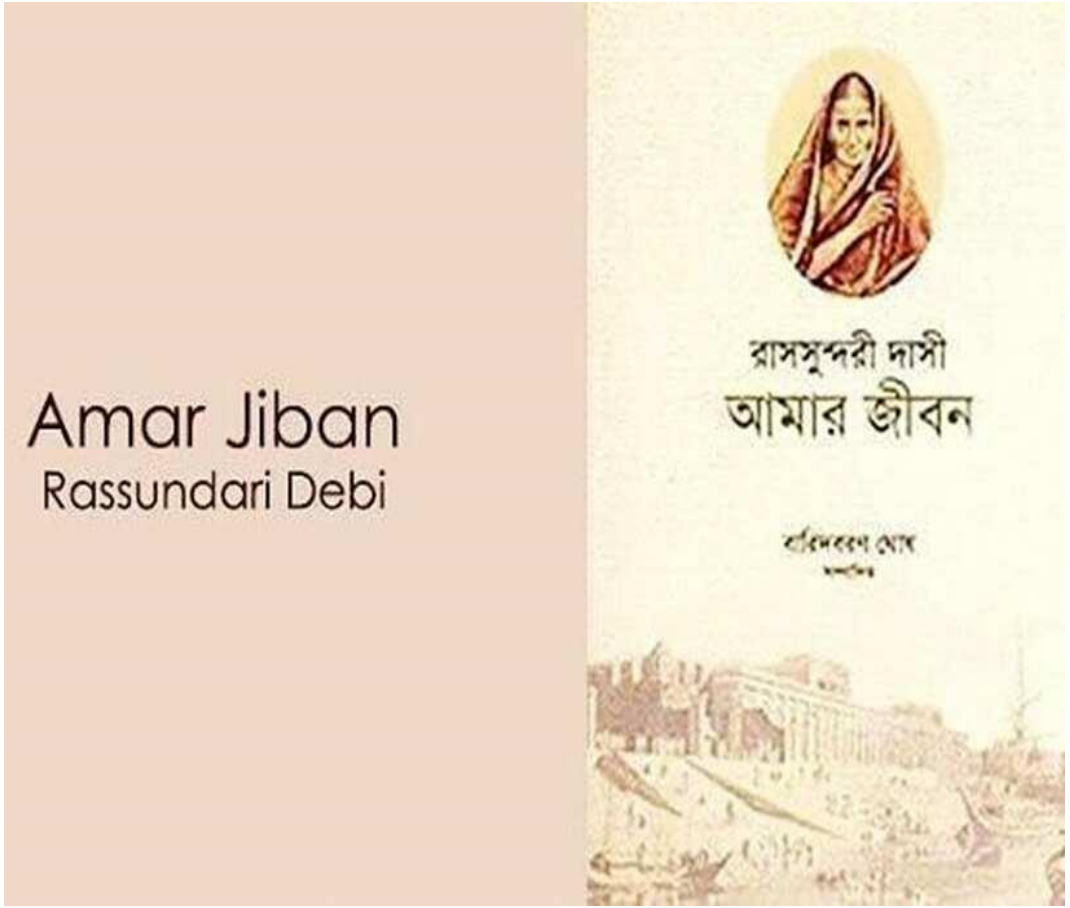
(In an Interview to Ranabir Rangra)

“Don’t Wash”

(For Rasha Sundari Debi)
No, don’t.
Don’t ever clean with water
the dark, sooty walls
of your kitchen, Rasha Sundari.
For the akshara 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 will 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.
You need no book, Rasha Sundari
no paper or pen either
you have the black, smudgy kitchen wall
for your magical scribbles
lines, ellipses, curves
all of them your secret codes for
a whole new world.



“She”

She wears well-tailored clothes
and value judgments with flair
filling them out with her form
that houses a being tight and spring-tensed.

She is house-proud
(as she needs to be)
her dining room simply gleams
with clean health
cheerful carnations on the table,
bursting with colors, tempered with
the white of lady`s lace.
Sitting and living rooms
breathing an air of uncluttered ease
the floors swept clean
as her empty heart.

Through the open doors
she stares across at the
orderly back garden
tracing her lengthening shadow
on long afternoons of pealing stillness.
Outside, the young mango tree has
blossomed biennially, like a rare poet.
A rash of new, glossy leaves,
shimming copper, and on the branches,
sweet-throated birds evoked
the pain of memories.
She looked at the eagle
soaring above in circles
shrill note tearing through the cool blue.
She cried silently with the kite
as it glanced down, eyes
frankly red and angry.

Characteristic Features of Her Poetry

- First person narrative
- Economy of expression
- Figurative language
- Indian setting
- Conversational tone
- Regional flavor
- Natural imagery and symbol
- Melody
- Lucid and free style

You insisted it was me

In the verse of your love I gaze in consternation;

At you too, That you should feel the Lines of your own love-potential,

and Trace a woman there I (Doubt)

Imagery and symbol

- She uses natural imagery like- birds, winds, rain, storm, shadow, curds and mango tree.

"The birds have flown home,
the people retired for the day
sounds have stilled
but the uncertain lights wait,
they wait."

Symbol

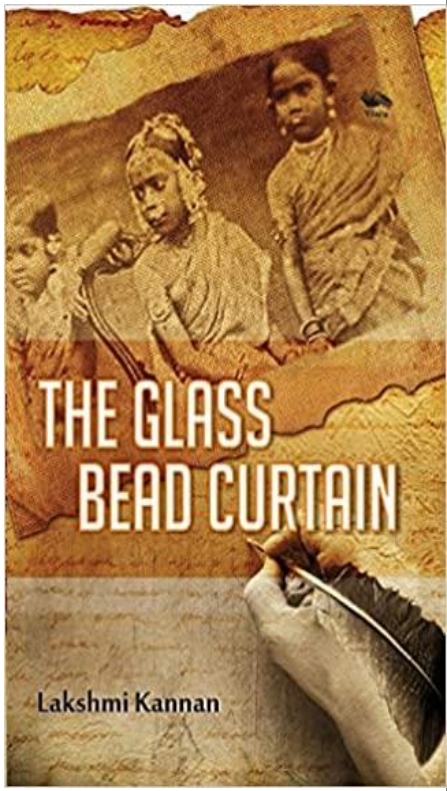
- ***Rain***- Symbol of fertility, renewal and rebirth
- *River*- Symbol of free, strong spirit and also symbolic of quiet and nourishing. It has both life-affirming and life-negating qualities.
- ***Journey of diya in river-*** Symbolic of the journey from innocence to experience
- ***Water***- It can both create and erase. (*Don't Wash*)



Her Women

- In her *Unquiet waters s*he has presented a distinct picture of women.
- Women are not flowers but spring which nurture the flowers.
- She equates women to the flow of river. River is the symbol of whole life of women.
- They come everyday to river to take bath, to celebrate, to worship and ultimately everything returns to water which is the source of creation of everything. (cycle of birth, death and rebirth).
- Women have the qualities of river, like quiet, nourishing but when time comes, they can also have the quality of liberty, storm and even destruction.
- Through the myth of Draupadi and Guinevere she attacks male pride-:

  “she has done it.
  Has offended the supreme male
  into a sullen silence
  by her terrible nakedness.”



Themes Explained

- **Ordinary Woman-**: She has celebrated ordinary woman in her poetry like *Family Tree* and *Wood Rose*. She has also critiqued the patriarchal framework through her sharp irony.

"no, no, don't run.
don't take long strides,
don't raise your voice,
be a women, be moderate in everything
be a model of mediocrity."

- **Devotion and Spiritualism**-: She is also a devotional poet who evokes Lord Ganesha in many poems, In *Ekdanta*, she thanks Ganesha for being with her in her every line and in every words.

"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.
……
I don't know
but I do carry you everywhere with me.

- **Indian setting-**: Her poems are drawn from Indian life, rituals and myth.

She celebrates the ordinary Indian people. Tamil language and culture finds special mention in her poetry.

"Sitting on a clean-swept earth
fed us on cooked rice
laced with the salt of folk-tales
fed us on *curds* and *Kamban*
as we licked the tang of *Tamil*."

"She feels that poetry in English by Indian women oscillates between writing as a social manifestation or assertiveness and the desire to accomplish a literary competence." (Srinivasa Iyengar)

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Thank You