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Book Review: Daughters of Kerala: 25 Short Stories by Award-Winning Authors

Marie Varghese

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Daughters of Kerala. Achamma C. Chandерsekarан (transl.). 2004.
Tuscan: Hats Off Books. pp.196. US\$ 17.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Marie Varghese¹

Daughters of Kerala: 25 Short Stories by Award-Winning Authors, presents a refreshing collection of fictional narratives that vividly represent the everyday experiences of women from the southwest state of Kerala, India. These pieces were originally published in Malayalam over a span of seventy years, and each story has been translated into English for the first time by Achamma Chandерsekarан, a diasporic Keralite and former international trade specialist for education and training services at the U.S. Department of Commerce. While it may surprise potential readers of *Daughters of Kerala* to discover that a number of contributors to this anthology are male, Chandерsekarан explains in the preface that her selection of stories was not based on the gender of the author but rather in the commitment of each writer to feature Malayalee women in the 20th century. Taking this point into consideration, this anthology complicates the notion of what counts in South Asian Women's writing and may be useful to individuals interested in Women and Gender Studies and the social sciences, as well as creative writing. Despite the fact that none of the writers in this anthology explicitly describe their works as "feminist texts," it should be noted that these stories can be used in the classroom to discuss feminist approaches to analyzing prose produced in the global south.

According to Chandерsekarан, the stories included in this volume can be grouped according to two sub-themes. The first theme that emerges within these narratives confronts the challenges and possibilities of education among women in Kerala. This region of India is known for high levels of literacy and formal education among women, despite having one of the lowest per capita incomes in the country. This "Kerala Model" of governance, a legacy of socialist policies on education and land reform, has caught the attention of academics and development analysts for decades. Yet, as some of these stories demonstrate, these noteworthy advances in educational opportunities do not always translate into more autonomous conditions for women. As R.E. Ascher points out in the foreword, education is regarded as a "passport to marriage" for women in many cases, and a number of short stories echo this perspective in the book. For example, Sarah Thomas' (1998) "A Rest House for Travelers" descriptively illustrates the situation of Mrs. Jayadev, a bright college student who has married a professor at her school. Thomas writes, "Many women envied [Mrs. Jayadev]...But today, if they knew the truth...she was just his housekeeper, nothing more, except for the social occasions at the college when she was just an adornment" (29). In contrast, a story written fifty years earlier by K. Saraswathyamma, (1948) "Female Intellect: Women Have a Mind Too," features the outgoing and strong-willed Vilasini, who is regarded by her teachers as the star pupil of her school. Throughout the narrative, Vilasini contends with accusations of being called a "scandalous woman" by her peers, simply because she engages in debates with male students in her class. On one occasion, while attending a social gathering at school, Vilasini is described by her peers as "a woman with manly qualities" (128). After the

¹ Marie Varghese is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University.

protagonist refuses the sexual advances of a male student, the author writes that Vilisini “thought about her behavior towards him to figure out if she had done anything to give him the wrong impression. She had not felt anything more for him than camaraderie with a colleague, nor had she acted in any other way. She only behaved like a man would to another man” (130). Stories such as these can certainly lay the groundwork for engaging classroom discussions about the intersections between gender roles and education.

Another recurrent theme in this book involves stories that deal with women confronting patriarchal norms imposed on women as wives and mothers. While the all-too-familiar trope of the suffering Indian woman trapped by tradition is present in a number of these narratives, (for example, “Fraction,” “Amma,” and “Lies My Mother Told Me”), other stories describe women who resist the norm as they experience intimacy and desire outside the institution of marriage. For example, in “Ghare Baire: At Home and Outside” by Gita Hirayan (1997), the author writes about a woman who spends her days daydreaming of her love-affair with her neighbor, Haridas. As the story progresses, the female protagonist questions her lover and asks him if he would permit his own wife to pursue an extra-marital affair to which he replies, “I would kill her” (98). In “A Lullaby of Dreams” by Martin Eresseril (1974), a married woman admits her attraction to a young man living in her neighborhood without realizing that her husband silently acknowledges and reluctantly complies with the situation. Other stories that touch upon intimacy outside of marriage include “Rosemary” (1978), “Underling” (1945), and one of the earliest published pieces in the collection, “In the Shroud” (1931).

One of the great strengths of this anthology comes from the variety of voices that are featured in these stories. These stories represent the experiences of women from variety of economic backgrounds; narratives of the urban middle class (“A Rented House”), the working poor (“Wooden Dolls”), and the Malayalee elite (“One Still Picture Cannot Capture a Life’s Story”) offer fascinating insights into the intersections of women’s roles in relation to social class. The women characters in these texts also represent major religious denominations in Kerala including Hindus (“Sandalwood for a Funeral Pyre”), Muslims (“The Dawn of Enlightenment”), Christians (“When Big Trees Fall”) and Jewish communities (“A Dream From Israel”). However, readers who are unfamiliar with the social, political, economic, and religious contexts of life in Kerala may have limited success in grasping the historical framework of these stories unless they seek assistance from outside texts. For example, “A Dream from Israel” could have been enhanced by scholarly commentaries on the centuries-old Jewish community in Cochin. Likewise, the generous old woman in “The Daughter of Man” who continuously provides food for underprivileged people in her community would have benefited from an introductory analysis of the legacy of socialist land reform in the region. In the preface to the anthology, Chandrasekaran notes, “Malayalam writers and Kerala culture have to pass through translation before they can be presented to the world.” Unfortunately, the difficulty of the translation is not only fostered by the lack of contextual information, but also evinced by a few noticeable instances of awkward word choice and inelegant phrasing.

While some of Kerala’s most internationally recognized Malayalee women writers such as Arundhati Roy and Meena Alexander are not included in this anthology, Chandrasekaran should be applauded for highlighting the work of authors that have, until now, been inaccessible to non-Malayalee speaking audiences. At the same time

Chandersekaran's exclusive focus on "award-winning authors" makes me wonder about the missed opportunity of publishing new texts by Malayalee women writers who have been marginalized by the mainstream Kerala literary scene. For instance, it would have been interesting to read short stories that reflect the experiences of queer women, gender non-conforming women, sex workers and unmarried elderly women. In addition, I found it surprising to discover that there were no stories about diasporic Malayalee women living outside the subcontinent, considering that both the publisher and the translator are based in the United States. Nonetheless, *Daughters of Kerala* is a welcome addition to the corpus of literature about women from south India.