

Lib



Sahitya Akademi

24 November 2007

meet the author

Sugatha Kumari



*To this torrential flood, add my tear drop;
To this howling hurricane, add my life
breath;
To this glorious resplendence, add my
grateful smile.*

- **Sugathakumari**

Sugathakumari started publishing poetry in the 1950s, arguably the richest decade of Malayalam poetry. Elders like G. Sankara Kurup, Balamani Amma and Vylloppilly Sreedhara Menon cheerfully took note of her distinct voice. Fellow poets-- many of them practitioners of modernist poetry--readily acknowledged her elemental difference. And the succeeding generation, despite theoretical objections, finds it hard to dispute her creative mastery. Fifty years later, her poetry continues to engage popular imagination and engender critical interest.

Sugathakumari's matrilineal roots trace back to Aranmula, a historic temple town of central Travancore, on the banks of the river Pampa, famous for its pageantry of snake boats. Her mother Kathyayani Amma did her Masters from the University of Madras and retired as professor of Sanskrit. Her father Bodheswaran was a protean; wrestler, Gandhian, freedom fighter, social reformer and sanyasin, he was better known as a poet. His "*Kerala Gaanam*" was a marching song for all those who fought for the unification of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Sugatha did her schooling in Thiruvananthapuram. Her home was verily a literary hub. Bodheswaran was a great source of inspiration; he would recite poetry aloud. Kathyayani Amma would introduce her to the best of world literature. Sugatha's elder sister Hridayakumari, a brilliant student of English, went on to become a reputed teacher and author. Sujatha Devi,

her younger sister, is a robust poet of exceptional merit and a distinctively good prose writer. Incidentally, all the members of this sister trinity are Kerala Sahitya Akademi awardees - most likely, an unparalleled confluence of literary consanguinity.

Sugatha did her Honours in philosophy and proceeded to do her doctoral dissertation in comparative philosophy on the "Concept of Moksha". In 1960, she got married to Dr. K. Velayudhan Nair and moved on to Delhi-- which was to be the backdrop of many of her poems-- to stay there for a decade. Author, academician and scholar, Dr. Nair unenviably encouraged Sugatha in her literary pursuits and immeasurably assisted her in her other spheres of work. Sugatha has explicitly recounted her love, admiration and gratitude to her soul mate in more than one poem. She has also touchingly sung at length of her bereavement in many of her recent poems. Daughter, sister, lover, wife and mother - the tragedy of Indian womanhood is never complete sans widowhood. Sugatha's only daughter, Lakshmi Devi, is a poet and lyricist with two collections of poems and two awards to her credit.

Sugatha gratefully reminisces that but for the intervention and encouragement of another literary savant-- the polymath N.V. Krishna Warrior-- her life would have taken an entirely different course. N. V. was then the editor of the premier journal, "Mathrubhoomi" and she had sent a poem for publication under a nom de plume. N. V. with his indefatigable penchant for spotting literary talent, whole heartedly welcomed her writings. It was N.V. who published her "*Kaaliyamardanam*" in "Mathrubhoomi".

Probably the Publication of "*Kaaliyamardanam*" determined the



Padmasree from H E the President of India APJ Abdul Kalam



Blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama

trajectory of her literary career. The stoicism of this Kaaliya subverted the picture of the puranic Kaaliya and demanded pluralistic readings--

Never were these hoods lowered
 Never did this soul weep...
 Do not ever stop the dance;
 My soul merges into a rapturous
 cadence.

Was it a manifestation of feminine masochism with sexual undertones? Was it another instance of the oppressed unwittingly and quiescently submitting before the oppressor? Or was it total supplication of the bhakta even in the face of the worst adversities? Interestingly, the poet herself has written about the birth of this poem-how Eliot's "I have seen them riding seaward on the waves" initially prompted it, how she wrote on unconsciously and how the details of Krishna's image atop Kaaliya presented themselves before her without her ever having to look for them. She would have us believe that she identified with the serpent unknowingly and that it was the story of man forever damned to persist with his agonizing karma - man who emerges stronger, since he accepts all anguish as God's blessings. Possibly the poem is about all that. But what is important is that it subtly presaged the three major strands of her poetic oeuvre-the soft and delicate feminine love, ever pining and unrealised, unrelenting resistance against mounting injustice and absolute devotion to God, unabashed of idolatry. What is more, it also pointed to another cardinal element in her poetry-the ever-recurring theme of Krishna.

What indeed distinguished Sugatha's early writings was a sense of inconsolable sorrow. The dream land was perpetually dusky and an all pervading melancholy shrouded her youthful love. Not for nothing that she named a poem and a collection "The Wings of Darkness".

Discerning readers had perceived it. But it was N.V. who went into it at length. In the grand preface he wrote to one of her celebrated collections, he confessed that he was not at all in agreement with her pensive outlook on life. At the same time he conceded that he was mesmerized by the abiding charm of her poetry. After minutely analyzing the political and philosophical origins of her poetry, he also prophesied that a poet who could empathise with humanity at large as in-

Pity the human heart!
 It sees a lonely star and forgets the
 long night,
 It sees a passing drizzle and forgets
 the long drought;
 Seeing a milky smile, it forgets death
 and rejoices.
 Pity the human heart!
 --cannot but turn to a healthier and
 more spirited world view and
 consummate in *karma yoga*.

N. V.'s prediction came true. Many poems with overt political content, deliberating on the state of the nation appeared in the early seventies. Her reaction to the infamous Emergency was ironic and ambivalent-

We've got what we deserve, we
 remain tame;
 We've turned the chalice of liberty
 bottom up.

And when Ms.Gandhi lost the elections, Sugatha wrote another poem - "*Priyadarshini! We Loved You So Dearly!*" - - unmindful of allegations of siding with the oppressor. Two significant poems appeared around this time- "*Krishna! You Wouldn't Ever Know Me!*" and "*The Temple Bell*". Significant since they reflect the poet's crucial concerns-concerns relating to love, sensitivity, spiritual realization and above all, *ars poetica* itself.

Sugatha's poetry underwent a sea change with her participation in the

conservationist movement. The struggle against the proposed hydro-electric project in the Silent Valley rain forests was the first of its kind in Kerala. She, along with many fellow poets, founded the Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti in 1980 and organized conscientization programmes all over the state. It also marked the beginning of a literary movement with conservation as its core theme. She led from the front with many poems such as "Hymn to the Tree", "An Ode to River Thames" etc. Concern for environment has permanently defined the course of her life and poetry thereafter. Understandably so, because it integrates well with the Gandhian tenets which form the bedrock of her philosophy of life.

Apparently, images of mentally disabled women had stuck to her early enough. Rain at night had appeared before her as a mad young woman-weeping, whimpering, tossing her hair and sitting all huddled up. Empathy consummated into action in 1985, with the founding of "Abhaya", an organization for the welfare of the mentally ill. Born out of a deep concern for the hapless mental patients living in subhuman conditions within the Government mental asylums, "Abhaya", focused public attention, influenced government policies and appealed to the judiciary for radical reforms in the mental health sector. Over the last two decades, "Abhaya" has enlarged its scope of activities to rehabilitation of the mentally ill, women and children in distress, legal aid for poor women, treatment centers for the mentally ill and addicts, homes for girl children from high risk groups etc.

Fortunately, all this work did not dry up the springs of poetry. On the contrary, they reinforced each other and augmented their resources reciprocally. Verily, the ever-enlarging spectrum of extra-literary activism and its symbiotic relation to her

work has sharpened Sugatha's sensitivity and deepened her understanding of human misery. It oriented her to the puranic stories of Sita (as in "Paadaprathishtha") and Devaki (as in "Amma") on the one hand and to the stories of countless suffering women around us on the other as in "The Girl Child in the Nineties". Perhaps this is not something new, as the early work "Streeparvam" would testify. Simultaneously, the resilient theme of Krishnabhakti also surfaced and she wrote many exquisite pieces delineating the primaevial child, the eternal lover and the ever-present saviour in Krishna. Sugatha has an entire collection singularly devoted to poems on Krishna ("Krishnakavitakal") and a long poem on Radha - "Where's Radha?"

But even Sugatha, obdurate, hardened and stoic as she was, could not bear to see the indescribably brutal instances of violence meted out to the women and girls of her highly literate, progressive state basking in the glory of matriarchal power, when she took over in 1996 as the first Chair person of the Kerala State Women's Commission. Victims of dowry deaths, domestic violence, incest, paedophilia and organized sex rackets continually streamed before her for five long years. Among the perpetrators and abettors of these savage crimes were the rich, the mighty and the famous. She antagonized many of them and brought forth calumny and slander upon herself. Many poems-notably, the one titled "Vanitha Commission" - related to this phase are irremediably dark and disturbing.

At seventy-three, Sugatha remains remarkably agile in spirit and resolute in purpose. Aforestation, environmental legislation, prohibition, consumer rights protection, women's empowerment, and legal aid for the poor women, psychiatric social work- innumerable are the issues that engage her attention even today. Add to it the several protracted public interest litigations and the simple financial strain of running "Abhaya". She reads extensively, travels a great deal and is ever present in the highly politicized public domain of Kerala. A conscientious objector, she has remained the proverbial thorn in the flesh for the so called leftists and rightists. Allegations of Hindutva by fellow writers do not deter the believer in her. Condemnations of ideological inadequacy by partisan feminists only reinvigorate her. In the midst of it all, she continues to write - unmindful of the unending denunciations heaped on her and ever grateful for the several honours that come her way.

Perhaps this has been possible on account of the exceptional rapidity of her creative process. The best of her poems, admittedly, have been conceived and completed instantly in half agony, half





With the daughters of 'Abhaya'

ecstasy. Her intellect, she claims, is unaware and unconscious of the ways in which an idea converts itself into a verbal construct. Very often, she only transcribes on to paper what has taken shape within, as though in a kaleidoscope. Such a process will not pause for grammatical exactitude or prosodic perfection. Hence her predilection for free flowing tunes, despite her adeptness in working with intricate Sanskrit metres. Not for her the prose poems devoid of music. And she sings only for those who resonate on the same megahertz, the *samaanahrdayas*. (Incidentally, she has vowed not to publish her poems in the 'special numbers'

of journals; for, many readers may not be able to afford their cost.) By an unknown literary alchemy, she infuses the utmost emotive quality into her compositions. And by an unexplained prefatory silence, she lulls the audience to readiness before she starts reciting. Her essentially lyrical imagination may revel in emotional extravaganza; but the abandon and ease with which she creates the effect is a matter of envy. Historically and intrinsically, Sugatha is an important poet of Malayalam. And it is no mean achievement to hold sway on a bigoted community for over half a century in one's lifetime.

Important Awards and Honours

Vidya Ratna Founders' Award, Madras	1966
Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award	1967
Sahitya Pravartaka Award	1978
Sahitya Akademi Award	1979
Odakkuzhal Award	1982
Asan Award	1984
Vayalar Award	1984
Best Public Observer Award	1984
Vriksha Mitra (Indira Gandhi Memorial Award for Conservation of Nature, Govt. of India, New Delhi)	1986
All India Women's Conference Diamond Jubilee Honour (New Delhi)	1987
Kerala Cultural Centre (Oman) Literary Award	1988
Nehru Fellow Award (Calcutta)	1989
Asan Prize (Madras)	1990
Guru Chengannur Literary Award	1992
Mahakavi Ulloor Award	1992
Viswadeepam Award	1993
Govt. of India Fellowship (Ministry of Culture, New Delhi)	1994
Sacred Soul Award (Culture Care	

Foundation, USA)	1994
K.R. Chummar Award	1995
Siri Ram Washesharan Devi Bhatia Memorial Charitable Trust Award (New Delhi)	1995
Abu Dhabi Jana Samskriti Award	1995
Abu Dhabi Malayalee Samajam Award	1996
Janmashtami Puraskaram	1997
M.K.K. Nair Cultural Award	1999
Children's Literature Award Govt. of Kerala)	1999
Award of Distinction (Shanti, Washington)	2000
Award for Extraordinary Human Efforts to improve the lives of women and children, the helpless and the homeless (Association of Asian Indian Women, Ohio, USA)	2000
Sevaratnam Award	2001
Lalithambika Antharjanam Memorial Literary Award	2001
Founder Member Award (World Association for Psycho-Social Rehabilitation,	

Indian Chapter	2002	Padmasree (Govt. of India)	2006
Vallathol Award	2003	Sanjayan Award	2006
Honorary Fellowship of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi	2004	Panampilly Govinda Menon Award	2006
Assissi Award	2004	Devi Prasadam Award	2007
Balamani Amma Award	2004	Sthreesakthi Award	2007
Sahithya Acharya Award	2004	Sree Sai Ratna Award	2007
K.V. Thomas Award	2005	Mahakavi P. Kunjiraman Nair Award	2007
Mathrubhoomi Grihalakshmi Award	2006	Sahitya Kala Nidhi	2007

Books Published

Muthuchippi	Thulaavarshappaccha
Swapnabhoomi	Radhayevide ?
Paathiraapookkal	Krishnakavithakal
Paavam Maanavahrdyam	Devadaasi
Irulchirakukal	Ayalathu Parayunna Kathakal
Pranaamam	Vaazhathen
Raathrimazha	Oru Kula Poovum Koodi
Ampalamani	Manalezhuthu
Kurinjippookkal	Sugathakumariyude Kavithakal (Sampoornam)
Kaavutheendalle	

What is the colour of love? *Translated by Irdaya Kumari*

What is the colour of Love?
White it is like mother's milk
Falling drop by drop, drop by drop
On the famished lips of a tender babe.

Tell me, what is the colour of Love?
Red it is, glowing like the red red rose
Petals opening out in vigorous joy,
Aflame with all the thirsts and dreams of youth.

Tell me, what colour is Love?
Like the midsummer sun
Fire and smoke and brilliant light it is
Crown of dazzling gold on the forehead's width.



Tell me, what is the colour of Love?
At eventide, at nadir of weariness
When trembling lips try
to shape the last words

The holy water falls
Drop by drop, drop by drop
Love is so soothing cold
Hot tears fall
Drop by drop, drop by drop
Love is so burning hot

In the throes of the last thirst
On the scorched lips
Love comes flowing in
It fills, it flows over, it is full
It has no colour at all.

What is the colour of love?
It is fullness, perfection
It has no colour at all