

Third Earth and Other Short Stories

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By - *Dr. Aruna Sitesh*

Foreword

All story-tellers have a story of their own – sometimes told and sometimes untold. All story writers are not lucky enough to get a faithful biographer, nor all of them take up autobiographies. And who would have imagined she will bid her adieu so soon!

I find it hard to believe that Aruna ji is no more – I mean in flesh and blood and her affectionate smiles. I had never imagined I will have to write a foreword for her work when she is not around.

Thinking of Aruna ji takes me into the reveries of over two decades during which I got to know her not only as a writer and editor but also as a dear friend. The more I met her and talked to her, I learnt something significant about her multi-faceted personality. But the most striking feature was that her humility kept growing along with all the worldly success she achieved in her short life span. I wholly agree with Dr. Ramdarsh Mishra who had said at the commemoration of her first death anniversary that, even more than a good writer, she was a very good person.

I must admit that the language barrier kept me ignorant of her literary works for a long time as I am slow to grasp Hindi, the language in which she published most frequently. However, some of her short stories in English translation had caught my attention. I felt pleasantly surprised when I saw them again in this anthology. The face of poor litter Toshi flashed my mind as soon as I started reading *The Debt* of this anthology. Similarly, the puzzling questions left unanswered by Meeta, of *Decision*, tickled me. So natural and diverse are the characters penned by Aruna ji and so lasting is the impression they tend to create.

My association with Aruna ji (that's how I addressed her), besides as a colleague at Delhi university, was through the English quarterly, *Pratibha India*, which she published and edited along with her husband. A few of my Assamia short stories in English translation were also published in this unique journal. Later, she included one of them in the anthology of Indian short stories – *Glimpses: The Modern Indian Short Stories*, which she had so deftly edited.

In addition, being devoted to literature, she regularly organized literary meets at her residence, almost every month, where several writers and poets, established as well as upcoming, assembled, read and discussed each-other's works. Besides local Hindi writers and poets, we often had a chance to hear and interact with some writers of other languages, and even some from other cities occasionally.

Aruna ji's industriousness followed her in international sojourns as well, and while in USA, she made effort to contact twenty-two prominent women writers living far and wide across the country, interviewed them and translated their representative short stories into Hindi. Consequently, the three volumes that she published, in Hindi and English, not only enriched her own vision but also contributed greatly to the world of literature. It built bridges between the East and the West and her honest assessment of American women writers appears commendable.

Aruna ji's debilitating ailment began manifesting symptoms during her short visit to Australia in 2005. Nevertheless, she remained undeterred in her literary mission and personally interviewed several eminent women writers there and, upon return to India, took up the translation of most of their short stories herself, into Hindi.

All this speaks of her deep love for literature which kept enriching her own vision as well as expanding the scope of literary art, world-wide. While Aruna ji's translations of western writers vouch for her ability to be an honest mirror of western sensibility, the present anthology of her own stories confirms her remarkable originality as a writer, and the fact that her own writing style

and content was wholly embedded in Indian culture and its unique ethos. All said and done, she was a family person with vivid memories of close as well as distant relatives, neighbours and friends. They all seem to find place in her works, weaved in stirring and diverse situations. Human ambitions, innocent desires, personal struggles, petty quarrels, joys, frustrations – all find place somewhere or the other. *Dadis, nanis, chachis, mamas* and *mamis*, brothers and *bhabhis* – relatives young and old, near and distant became her characters so naturally that they invariably appear our own. In one of her stories she has taken up the plight of a handicapped girl with sensitivity which only someone with a sympathetic heart and keen observation could conceive so poignantly.

Besides her independent creative writing, she kept translating occasionally. Her translation into English of Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Andher Nagari*, along with her husband, is a rare work in the sense that it is a literary first. The translation of the opening couplet, i.e. *Andher Nagari Choupat Raja*, is an accomplishment in itself. Their translation of the play was first published in *Enact* and then it was reproduced by Sahitya Akademi in *Indian Literature*.

It's sad that her literary creativity suffered a good deal ever since she took up the responsibility as the principal of the college where she had taught for about three decades. While the college gained in terms of good administration and prestige, her literary output declined. Her enhanced status did not bring any change in her friendly behaviour, or the manner she dressed or the model of the vehicle she used but, as she moved into the spacious bungalow allotted to her by the management, the frequency and the size of the literary gatherings at her residence improved. She started organizing classical music sittings simultaneously where several top musicians of all-India stature performed occasionally.

Indeed, I found Aruna ji as a rare, non-self-promoting editor. So humble and selfless she was that during the 24 years of her editorship she never ever published her own short story in the journal she edited. Though a competent translator, she accorded last priority to translating her own works. I am pleasantly surprised to see, read and write foreword to the anthology of her short stories.

Here, without commenting and going through the details of the stories included in this volume, I will only say that they confirm my impression and I feel proud of having known a good person and a good writer, though for a short time. Truly, the variety of themes and the plurality of characters she conceived will stir anyone. Especially the female characters created by her – like Shubhi of *The Setting Sun*, Punno of *Sweet Home*, the protagonist of *Third Earth* or Paro of *the Pawn* speak volumes of her sensitive heart and craftsmanship wherein she unfolds their trauma and turmoil without putting on the garb of crude feminism or a crusader for women's rights.

I vaguely remember a few of her other themes which had cropped up during casual conversations with her. I do not find them here. Obviously, this anthology of translations is more of a collection of the available translations and not a collection of her representative short stories. During her life time Aruna ji published at least six collections of short and long stories. A representative volume would require a proper editor who would make a judicious selection and arrange for their translation and publication. I would keenly look forward to that day and wish that it comes soon. In fact, I am told a couple of her short stories were translated and published in Punjabi and Gujarati. I wish many more of them are made available in other languages too – to begin with my own Assamia.

Guwahati

— Dr. Indira Goswami

Deepawali, 2009.

A note on the translators :

□ Dr. Naresh K. Jain, formerly Reader in English in a Delhi University college, is currently interested in dalit literature and folklore. His translation of Om Prakash Valmiki's short stories has been published as *Amma and other stories*. He has also translated fifty Maithili songs on Kosi.

□ R.S. Yadav is a freelancer and art critic based in Delhi. Edited *Dhara*, a quarterly in English, in the seventies and the eighties.

□ Raji Narasimhan is a fiction writer, critic and translator, best known for her novel *Forever Free* and the short story collection *The Illusion of Home*. Has translated extensively from Hindi into English.

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Fragmented

DO DAYS have shades and tints? Can bright colours be sad? She can't say, but many of her days have had such a shade, she is sure.

Today too the moment the door would open, Mani will know what is cooking for dinner, she thought as she has used mustard in seasoning. Her cheeks flushed crimson thinking of the impassioned touch of the reward he would offer.

The first time she learnt that all the corridors of that house were made to draw in and retain each and every smell, she was disturbed for many days. The moment the weather turned better she flung open the shutters for as long as possible. But the breeze sneaked in and the aroma of the spices wafted out. When the Khosla family had for the second time started listing her menu by just breathing it in from outside the building, she was both surprised and enraged. The question was not of secrecy but of privacy. It looked as if a part of her own self had been ripped open.

"Are you expecting someone?" Seeing her preparations Ruth asked as she took something out of the fridge. Ruth speaks good Hindi now. Her accent is still somewhat odd but Ranjana has now got used to it.

"Ya!" An involuntary smile spread over her lips. A twinkle must have flashed in her eyes too.

"Mani!" A smiling Ruth was looking into her eyes.

"How did you know?" The shining eyes had a shy look.

"Your eyes told me," Ruth said.

It struck her just then that Ruth too could have been invited. After all, she knew Mani fairly well. This would have been a friendly gesture. Inviting her now wouldn't look nice, Ruth might not be able to make it either.

"Why don't you join us if not otherwise busy!" Ranjana couldn't help herself. The worst, she would say no.

"Thanks Ranu... I shall be going out with Jimmy. Hope you don't mind... Give Mani my love and congrats too," Ruth said putting some ice cubes into the glasses.

The words brought her great relief. She did want to be alone with Mani this evening. There was so much to tell, so much to ask. A final touch to be given to a dreamy future. And the time for all that — just a few hours. Not that she feared any intrusion from Ruth. But the feeling of someone's presence in the adjoining room couldn't but interfere with her intimate privacy. Ruth is extremely considerate. And lucky for her too. In a way the credit for her meeting with Mani goes to Ruth alone. Otherwise she was hell-bent on shifting to some other accommodation, some other apartment whose naughty breeze would not go around carrying tales of her likes and dislikes. But the problem was to find someone to share it with. She couldn't possibly afford an apartment all for herself. She urged Ruth to move along. But Ruth had no problem here. On the contrary, Ruth advised her too not to give up an accommodation so close to the University, for no rhyme or reason.

For no rhyme or reason? A distraught Ranjana had to then tell her that there was a reason, and not a trivial one either. And having learnt it Ruth laughed and laughed. After splitting into laughter she suddenly held Ranjana by the hand, dragged her out of the room into the corridor and said taking deep breath, "I don't smell a thing... What's there? Nothing." In fact, Ranjana too couldn't make out anything. She had often wondered if something was wrong with her nose. But getting accustomed was the real thing. The aroma so very tingling for the outsider they seemed to completely bypass them. She gave in to Ruth's persuasion. She had to. Had she given up this apartment, she would not have met Mani. Looking for an accommodation nearby, he had arrived here one evening. Step-ping into the corridor he stopped, startled. She could very well sense the reason — the aromatic air must have played host to welcome the newcomer. It was Mani's reaction that took her by surprise.

"You prefer Indian food! And cook it too! Hot and spicy like our own, back home! How wonderful...! Usually our girls acquire a new palate the moment they set foot on this land in their eagerness to be modern. Ham-chicken, Ham-chicken and Ham-chicken, that's all..."

For the first time she had felt like hugging this aroma... felt like caressing it.

Mani didn't like the residential accommodation he had come to see that evening. The apartment

he was already occupying, though a bit far from the University, was at least to his taste. But thereafter he started traversing this road, regularly, to meet her.

Four... tidying up the mess she looks at the clock. Mani will be here at five. Five he has said. Might well be later. It is not easy to wind up all the paraphernalia one collects over three long years. Ranjana had offered to help but Mani's friends are jacks of all trades. Packing is all done, she hopes... or else he would be in a hurry to return.

Now she should get ready. What to wear? Mani prefer a *saree* anytime. But which one? After many shuffling she picks up a pink one with blue border.

While doing her hair Vibha's words ring in her ears, "Don't go out wearing this colour. Its reflection gives a special glow to your face. You really look smashing!" With a smile she mumbles, "Well, lemme see, what does it do to Mani..."

Still there is a lot of time. Switching on the television she scans around the living room. Oh what's that! There is a chimpanzee holding a beer mug, displaying : 'Beer drinkers make better lovers.' Really...! Close by, Mr. Bruce Lee stands well all set for a kungfu fight. Ruth must have brought them. Only she is fascinated by such posters. But Mani...! It would be fun to watch his reaction!

Only a few days ago Clara had given her a picture of Abba. Taking it out of the almirah she counter-folds it a couple of times and having straightened it, pins it on the wall next to the window.

Mani would instantly see it and feel happy. He is a great fan of Abba's music. Taking out a few record discs she places them on the stereo turntable, he may want to listen. She takes Van Gogh's Sunflower to her room. Should it go next to Picasso? No, it would look better on the study table. Just raise your eyes and enjoy it. Would show equally clear from the bed too.

Next to the book-shelf stands a famous artifact from Khajuraho, a parting gift from Vineeta. She had presented her entire collection to Ranjana while returning to India. She had brought it thinking that it would make a fine gift but poor soul couldn't find a suitable person for such an intimate present. And she was extra-sentimental too. Later Ranjana wanted to gift one statuette each to Smita and Raksha but was surprised to find that they both already had similar pieces as if bought in whole-sale market before coming here.

Should she give one to Mani today? No, he deserves something less concrete and more lasting. Something unique. But what should it be! And the thought of making a parting gift didn't crop up in Ranjana all of a sudden. From the depths of her heart someone softly whispered to her to give something to her Mani which, acting as a bridge, would hold them together during the imminent three-month-long separation. Something that would constantly remind him of his Ranu's vibrations when an entire ocean spreads between their joined hands. Well, such a bridge was not a necessity. No, there was no ocean in the entire universe that would uproot and drown them into oblivion. No such fear worries her. No feet worth their name would get swept off by the waves. Still what is it that she could give him? A book? Some best-seller? No, could anyone ever pen their sublime feelings! Only some unique symbol could match their vestal love. A shirt or a pullover woven with the threads soaked in her love? Sounds obsolete. As it is, how would the machine-made things hold her deep feelings? Then... Then what...? She can't make up her mind. Better not to give anything than give something silly.

And then Mani hardly gave her anytime. All of a sudden came the phone call — his return plan has been finalized and he is leaving tomorrow morning. The whole day he would be busy packing and would visit her in the evening. Earlier the plan was that he would stay back for 3-4 weeks after the

viva. Something must have happened suddenly. He said he would give the details personally. What could it be? Whatever, she could not reconcile herself with the changed situation in such a short time.

That's how the bright colours turned dim and sad. Yet she was happy that Mani was coming. Happy that he had himself suggested that they have the meal cooked by her. One could be that free only with someone really close. But her heart sank at the thought that tomorrow morning he would fly off thousands of miles away from her.

THE DAY she had first arrived here was almost similar — bright and sad. There was excitement of seeing a whole new world on the one hand and the agony of leaving behind a host of friends and relatives on the other. Mummy's tear-drenched face haunted her for days. Without the assurance of *Bhaiya* and *Bhabhi*, it would have been impossible for her to concentrate on her studies.

The burst of spring colours had failed to strike a chord in her heart even the day she came to live here with Ruth. To live with a total stranger — common living room, common kitchen, common bathroom — how will it all work out? Struggling with such questions she spent several days only on milk and bread. It was Ruth who had comforted her tormented mind. This arrangement was not new to Ruth. Ranjana alone knows how those aeon-like days had come to an end! And now these three months. Her thesis has been typed. Her Professor has assured her of completing the remaining formalities in a short time. He is a resourceful man... capable of keeping his word. She will have to stay on till then. So far away from Mani?

But is there any alternative? And with no alternative, there was hardly any point in letting these precious few hours slip by in sheer sentimentality. She won't spoil Mani's mood in the moment of departure.

He should be here now. Emptying the packet of instant rice into boiling water she switches off the cooking range.

In the mean time she should spray the flowers in the vase. There isn't any hot-house nearby or else she would have bought some roses. Mani doesn't approve of such extravagance though. She could as well light some incense sticks. Mani is particularly fond of the rose fragrance.

She pauses for a moment. A naughty thought tickles her — these fragrant flowers, incense sticks, posters, statues — what if Mani loses restraint! She clutches at the very thought. Then laughs. Is it at all difficult for her to keep Mani under check? Like the last time she will tell him in plain and simple words to wait some more. Simultaneously she recalls Mani's reply, "I have my *samsakara*. Harbour no fear on my count. I am not so shallow... I can't even imagine forcing you into anything against your will."

Though, once the minds are made up and the decisions taken, towards marriage. Isn't it? What remains is just the ritual of going around the sacred fire. That's all.

The buzzer rings. With the opening of the door her smile blossoms flowers all around. Mani takes some time taking off his shoes. She takes his overcoat to the clothes' peg in the closet.

It doesn't take Mani time to figure out the things he relish-es. "I knew you would cook it..." the rest of the compliment is planted on her cheeks.

Her labour is rewarded, she feels.

Sipping his coffee Mani says, "Jamuna's wedding was fixed all of a sudden... on the 20th itself..."

That's why I have to rush."

20th... just 12 days hence.

Jamuna, Mani's only sister... It's natural for him to want to return home at the earliest.

In a way it's good. Mani at times used to worry that their relationship could jeopardise Jamuna's marriage prospects. Maybe it wouldn't, but *Amma* could raise hell on that ground. She knows Mani wouldn't care for any such opposition, but bitterness in relationships couldn't be ruled out. Jamuna could have been angry with her brother. Could have held it against him. Lifelong. And the blame for all that would have gone to Ranjana. She feels relieved... now she will be free of all such tension.

"Soon after that I will talk to *Amma*... When will you return?" Mani puts down the empty cup.

"Professor Allot has promised to get everything done in three months' time." She lowers her eyes even though the subject is much too familiar. Certain subjects never grow stale.

"Good. By then I would have settled everything. Have you written home?" It is but natural that Mani would want to make sure every-thing has been taken care of.

"Ya, but haven't posted it... It would be better if you give it to Mummy personally. She will like it that way."

"You haven't given me the address yet."

"It's there... on the envelope."

Mani had told her many a time to write to her people. But how can she tell him the reason for not doing so? *

These thought provoking short stories are documents of ambitions and frustrations faith and treachery, tranquility and turmoil and the concerns and conflicts so very common to life around us. The characters picked up from amongst us tell familiar tales, though with sensitivity and artistry peculiar to the author. All these stories, published originally in Hindi in prestigious periodicals had made waves which accorded the author a place among the foremost women writers in Hindi. These stories have been deftly translated into English by competent and ingenious transtators. Dr. Aruna Sitesh (1945-2007) taught English Literature for thirty years and was the Principal of Indraprastha College, Delhi University, for a decade until the last day of her life. A Fulbright Fellow (1991-92) at the University of Chicago and visiting scholar (1993) at Rockefeller Study Centre, Bellagio, Italy, she co-edited *Pratibha India* for about 24 years. While most of her creative writing, comprising six short story collections, was in Hindi she published another six volumes of critical studies, edited works, etc. in English. Her short story *Teesari Dharati* figures in the anthology of immortal hindi. Short stories by women writers, currently under publication by Sahitya Akadami. The honours and awards she received include Kriti Samman of Hindi Santhan, U.P. government, and Indira Priyadarshani Award for all round excellence.

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but ghosts are everywhere. Ward released two novels in the 2010s, this one and 2011's

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