

The City of Lost Souls

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Book: A Guest for Arundhathi and Other Stories
Author: Sethu (Translated from Malayalam by K Kunhikrishnan)
Publisher: Palimpsest Publishing House
Pages: 216
Price: Rs 250

Sethu, 73, belongs to a generation of writers who began writing in the 1960s and transformed the Malayalam short story and novel.

Influenced by European modernism, these story-tellers, among them OV Vijayan, Vadakkke Koottala Narayanankutty Nair (VKN), Madhavikutty (Kamala Das), Kakkanadan, MP Narayana Pillai and M Mukundan, ushered in “the big city” as an organic locale and challenged the realist and romantic narrative traditions then dominant in Malayalam. Each of these writers had a distinctive voice and saw the city differently. Someone like VKN and, to some extent, Vijayan, experimented not just with the plot, locale and narrative, but also with language and vocabulary.

Sethu, perhaps, the least flamboyant of the lot, has been no less inventive. A banker for most of his professional life, Sethu has lived in many parts of India. The city is a constant, often disturbing, presence, in his fictional world. His “city” always has a village within. Most of his lead characters have a rural upbringing and carry the moral universe of their childhood even while living in the city, which becomes a point of reference when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

The suggestive manner and tone of conversation in his fiction links him to illustrious predecessors like Karoor Neelakanda Pillai. Sethu, like Karoor, can build the edifice of a story and etch out characters with dialogues. As in Karoor’s world, the women in Sethu’s fiction are strong-willed and in control.



The collection, *A Guest for Arundhathi and Other Stories*, is representative of Sethu's short fiction. Its generic themes – the city as an alienating space, the communication gap between generations, mysteries of existence, including those introduced by technological changes – are reflected in the 10 stories ably translated by K Kunhikrishnan. Two of the best stories are 'Ammalu, the Eligible Girl' and 'A Guest for Arundhathi.'

Set in a village, 'Ammalu, the Eligible Girl' is about Ramankutty's visit to Ammalu to see if she would make a good bride. He is accompanied by two elders, who are matter-of-fact in their approach and focused on the purpose of the trip, whereas Ramankutty, a coconut tree climber by occupation, appears a little lost. Ammalu is portrayed as a capable and practical girl, who puts the elders in place and does most of the talking with Ramankutty, in the process subverting the idea of a bridegroom searching for a bride. The narrator hardly intervenes in the story, stepping in just to connect the dots, and it builds up around the conversations between the four characters. It is a mode of storytelling Sethu perfected in works like *Doothu* (Mission).

'A Guest for Arundhathi' is set in Mumbai. The city, the corporate world and the men who inhabit it loom over Arundhathi, a middle-aged, divorced executive. The story unfolds in real time, over an evening, when Arundhathi gets a call from someone, who seems to know all about her. Persuaded by her colleague and only friend, Indraja, she sets out to meet him. "In the bleak city lights, a middle-aged woman in a deep red sari waited alone for the strange caller," the story concludes. The uncertainty, Sethu seems to hint, is not limited to Arundhathi's specific condition, but is an inevitable condition of urban life. Sethu's characters are seldom happy away from home — and home can't be the city, which is a ruthless space that worships material success.

Like the city, technology too is seen as a threat to self and identity.

Sethu's *Chila Kalangalil Chila Gayatrimar* (Some Gayatris, Some Epochs) set around a call centre employee was one of the first stories in Malayalam to explore the inner worlds of the IT working class.

A more comprehensive selection of Sethu's short fiction ought to be available in English. Hopefully, this will prod more publishers to explore the fiction of this fine writer.