

## How story-telling is trumping over political analysis

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NEW DELHI: Be it the plight of a Muslim who struggles to extend his visa in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 terror attacks or drought-ravaged villagers in Bihar--the power of simple story-telling has proved much more effective than riffs of writings by political commentators or social historians of tectonic social changes.

This juxtaposition came out in a telling manner when the English translation (published by Palimpsest) "A Guest for Atundhathi and Other Stories" of eminent Malayalam writer Sethu's collection of short stories was launched on the penultimate day of the World Book Fair here on Saturday evening.

The book was launched by veteran journalist and author who told the audience that his only contact with literature was that he is the son-in-law of a noted author (a name he did not mention) and that he himself was not a student of literature.

Khare believes "a writer has a distinct advantage over the political commentator or historian because of his grand sweep of events and deep interpretation of the forces of change with the use of imagination."

At times, the writer's understanding of the social processes is more accurate and penetrating, said Khare and in this context mentioned 'The Onam Market', one of the short stories in the collection.

The story, according to him, gives a gripping account of the unrelenting profit motive of the business houses and the toll it takes on individuals' lives.

Fiction, according to Khare, could reflect the consequences of cataclysmic events more absorbingly than history or social science.

Pointing to the uncertainties troubling an Indian Muslim living in the US about the extension of his visa in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in 'The Babysitter', Khare said this mood of instability is more poignant than anything social history could offer.

For his part, said that in his writings he had always sought to record the inner experience of people in a particular situation through his characters.

Recalling his journey as a writer over half a century, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning writer said he had written his first short story in the cramped attic of a Karol Bagh house in Delhi in the year 1967.

"It was about the severe droughts in Bihar; after a visit to the worst-hit areas and scenes of human suffering I wrote the story without knowing anything about the craft of writing and it was published in the "Mathrubhumi" magazine by its legendary editor and writer," he said.

Bhaskar Roy, CEO, Palimpsest Publishing House, said "Sethu makes the grade of great writers by his ability to "capture the nuances of his culture very authentically and at the same time explore the newer territories".

He said "the women characters in the short stories display an exuberance and a robust sense of freedom that was typical of Kerala society. However, the character missing in this collection is the battered housewife; perhaps that has not been part of Sethu's cultural experience."

Roy said the writer of 'A Guest for Arundhathi' has a modern mind uninhibited by boundaries. True Sethu's writing captures Malayalam culture in its essence but it also shows an urgency to move beyond it: the corporate world of Mumbai, business hubs of Gujarat, the Indian expat community on the East Coast of the US. 'Babysitter' is "a deeply moving account" of the Indian community in New England, their aspirations in the new country and their love and longing for home, said he.