

THE UNSPOKEN WORDS

(By C S Lakshmi)

RAJESWARI is a translation of *Vindhiya's SUTHANTHIRAPPOR*. I must confess that I read the Tamil version to write my views on this novel. The translation is no doubt good but it somehow takes away the tone and the depth of the original as most translations do. *SUTHANTHIRAPPOR*, meaning the struggle for freedom, is a novel written in the late forties and fifties style of writing Tamil, and the English translation cannot capture the tonal qualities and the nuances of that language. Although the Tamil title refers to the freedom struggle, it only obliquely refers to those years and Gandhi. This is actually a war waged by an individual for her own freedom within the family as an institution. It is a fight she takes up for her own space to sing, interact and be herself within her marital family. The novel centers on the problem of non-communication in a marriage, a theme that writers like *Rajam Krishnan* and *Anuthama* dealt with in novels like *Penn Kural*, *Veedu*, *Gauri* and *Jayanthipurath Thiruvizha* in later years. The non-communication that *Vindhiya* talks about is not in terms of there being no conversations in a family but that words mean different things to different people depending on who speaks those words, and what remains unspoken can hurt much more than what is spoken and, while silence can speak volumes at times, it can also kill. *Rajeswari* in this novel is trying to unravel this mystery of what is spoken and what is understood and what remains unspoken finally leads to her breakdown. When she realizes that for a space to even just to be she needs to negotiate with the power structures of the family, she collapses. And, like always, her reactions are termed hysterical. When her mother *Visalam* asks her husband what hysteria means he gives long explanations of how it happens to women and the crucial question she asks is why it happens only to women and if men were immune to it.

The novel is set in a Brahmanical atmosphere and power relations, love for music and views on music and learning, attitude towards women, comments on regions with non-Tamils, are very typically Brahmin. The novel dwells on all these aspects but its focus is on a young fifteen-year-old girl who is trying to find herself within her parental and marital families which have remained rigid in their attitudes towards women although they have accepted the political changes in the nation and have to some extent even implemented the changes in their own households but have stopped short of asking the women what they would like to change and how they would like to change the family as an institution. What should be the female-male relationship in a modern family? What rights do women have as new entrants in a marital family? What should their language be? How tolerant should they be and how deviant? How compliant and how defiant? Should their language be truthful or diplomatic or full of lies? What role should food play in their relationship with their husband? Where should this new wife place her body and its desires in a marital household? Does her body belong to her or to the family as a whole? Does she have the right to fall ill? When she weeps because she can't speak out, is it hysteria?

It would be foolish to think that these questions have exhausted themselves in the present times. The aspects the questions deal with are the crucial areas of contention and they still remain the most poignant questions when we speak of domestic violence.

Although the usual statutory declaration is there in the translation that its characters are fictitious, this is certainly a part of *Vindhiya's* autobiography, the story of her life which she has fictionalized. It covers all the areas of her life and her own mental trauma when she realizes that a space for a woman in a family has to be fought for and that it is never given to her as a matter of right. The enormity of this realization and the insurmountable task ahead of her which she has already dealt with the wrong way by being a "good" daughter-in-law and wife is what breaks her at the end of it. She does write to her husband to come and take her because she feels that a woman without a husband is unacceptable to the society but nothing is resolved within her. It is a kind of disturbing truce that she is thinking of. And it is this denouement that makes it obvious to me that it is her own life that she is talking about for in life nothing can be resolved neatly. Many bloodless deaths are involved in life and Rajeswari knows it. This is also the reason why this novel did not win the *Kalaimagal* prize for open-ended novels where a narrative does not "end" in a certain sense were not acceptable in such competitions although they are quite acceptable now.

Vindhiya's family has kept her diaries. I feel that those diaries and this novel will form great source materials for writing one aspect of women's life in the thirties and forties.

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