

***Kala ki Talaash; Fiji se aye Kahaniyan* by Subramani**

(New Delhi: Star Publications, 2007)

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Kala ki Talaash-Fiji se aye Kahaniyan is a Hindi translation of Subramani's English short stories published in 1988 as *The Fantasy Eaters* by Three Continents Press in Washington, D.C. *Kala ki Talaash* was published in 2007 by Star Publications in Delhi that also published the author's widely acclaimed novel *Dauka Puraan* (2001). Although *Dauka Puraan* is extensively reviewed and analysed, there are very few reviews and comments of *Kala ki Talaash*. That is one of the reasons for this review.

The book has an intriguing art cover, a surrealistic drawing by the artist John Pule from Niue who also did the cover for *Dauka Puraan*. It's an appropriate cover for the stories that often deal with the interaction of reality and illusion. The anthology retains all the nine stories from *The Fantasy Eaters* and the novella plus an additional story called *Smitriyon se*.

The most striking thing about *Kala Ki Talaash* is the range of stories and styles. Some of the stories are realistic; others are surrealistic using modernist techniques. There are a wide range of characters from different backgrounds. The author is trying to depict Fiji's multi-cultural society from the perspective of different ethnic groups, genders and the viewpoints of young and old. The title *Kala ki Talaash* suggests multiple allusions. One could perhaps interpret the title as search for life, for art, for an identity. The book adds a new voice to Pacific literature in a regional language. *Kala ki Talaash* like the elusive search for nectar of life, is a work of true creativity.

In the transitional land that the characters inhabit, they meet different destinies. There is the old girmitiya Dhanpat in 'Sautu' who finally succumbs to disillusionment; Elaine remains alienated and rootless in 'Priye Adiwasi', and Mosese's sense of displacement and insecurity in 'Kis ka desh' all become signifiers for an entire community on the verge of disintegration.

The stories are about characters who search for strategies to survive or liberate themselves in this anxiety-ridden world. And one of the strategies, as in 'Sautu', is madness. The violence, aggression and desolation faced by Manu and Kunti in 'Batao train kaha jati hai?' and Gayatri in 'Jhadigat' and Dharma in 'Gende' make their lives forever precarious and on the edge of crashing.

Contrary to the view by someone like Shaista Shameem that women are misogynistically portrayed, Mrs. Gamalian and Kala are sensitively depicted in their inner lives. Critical judgement can seldom be passed usefully on female characterization unless one looks at a range of stories and characters that are portrayed by an author. Such women as Dharma, Gayathri and even some of the minor characters in other stories show complexity. The use of multiple perspectives from which these characters are seen, makes them proper human beings. Dharma in 'Gende' is trapped and powerless like many women. She faces uncertainties and broken dreams. Like genda (marigolds), Dharma also is trying to survive in an oppressive environment. Another story, 'Gamalian's Woman', is a celebration of the creative powers and freedom of women. Although Mrs. Gamalian marries several times, she is never dependent on any men. The matriarch weaves fiction into reality and reality into fiction and tragically barter her dreams for money. Kala in the title story, unlike Kunti in 'Batao train kaha jati hai', is a more strong spirited yet equally vulnerable young woman. She is an authentic portrayal of an educated, young woman coming to terms with her married life. Her sense of self is often submerged by what others expect from her in life. Casting about for her own voice, she faces anxiety and the possibility of disillusionment. Kala is someone that educated female readers would connect well with. She is another emerging strong woman in the stories. There are plenty of inner conflicts in these female characters. Thus the atmosphere of the stories is at once volatile and fragile. These women all have power of resilience and possibilities of growth.

Furthermore, because we can easily identify with the characters, the reader is readily drawn into their inner lives: the anguish of Dhanpat and Ratni in 'Sautu', Kunti and Manu's struggle to survive in an oppressive and alienating environment in 'Batao train kaha jati hai?', Elaine and Mosese and Kala's dilemmas, and even the tourists in 'Murg Marichika' whose patronizing concerns seem to have overtures of colonial superiority; they are all real human beings and they represent many facets of life's experiences. The use of the iTaukei name 'Sautu' is ironical. Sautu means prosperity and peace but Dhanpat's physical and mental disintegration suggest a different world. Irony in the stories acts to add depth to the

characters and themes.

Kala ki Talaash can be seen as a set of stories that work like different kinds of mirrors for the reader. Sometimes the mirror reflects reality and sometimes grotesque images. The essence of these stories lies in their dynamism and unique humour. The narratives are meant to have a cathartic effect on the reader. Laughing at one's state of pain and sickness, disease and death often gives the reader a sense of detachment as well as release or liberation. The portrayal of discontentment and dispossession and images of dereliction are all outer signs of the decay within the self and community that is trying to reconstruct its sense of identity and reinvent its wholeness. Ultimately, there is hope and of course celebration of the human spirit that endures and seems to have triumphed.

There is a unifying tone in the narratives that hold the book together. Subramani writes not just about his own ethnic group but also others who make up Fiji's multi-cultural community. The lives of these characters point out that no community has been immune to the effects of colonialism and that this increasing sense of displacement, rootlessness and alienation is part of history felt by all people of Fiji.

Some reservations about this otherwise versatile and empowering set of local narratives is that the use of standard Hindi can restrict readership in Fiji, especially the younger generation who will find difficulty in deciphering the meaning of certain vocabulary, which is beyond their living experiences because standard Hindi is not the mother tongue of Indo-Fijians. The younger generation use Fiji-Hindi and English and therefore the standard Hindi lexicon used in these stories can be a serious barrier. At the same time, standard Hindi makes the book accessible to the wider global Indian market. Subramani however has also written in Fiji Hindi, and his *Dauka Puraan* is a classic work.

Subramani's *The Fantasy Eaters*, now out of print, will soon be published locally with a number of new stories by the author. This is welcome news for readers in Fiji as the book will be more accessible and hopefully cheaper than the U.S. produced edition. It is hoped that the new stories will also be translated into Hindi.