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Book Review

A RED-NECKED GREEN BIRD

by Ambai, tr. GJV Prasad, Simon & Schuster India, India, 2021, pp.
200, ISBN: 978-8195057115

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A Red-necked Green Bird by Ambai, tr. GJV Prasad, Simon & Schuster India, India, 2021, pp. 200, ISBN: 978-8195057115.

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Ambai's short stories are known for the sensitive exploration of lives, spaces, institutions and their layered inter-connections through a feminist perspective. One of the earliest feminist voices in Tamil fiction, Ambai's writing offers a nuanced reading of social and personal conflicts and a critical reading of history and its impact on the middle-class zone of comfort. The numerous references to myths, music, food, sea and journeys that one encountered in her earlier collections of short stories recur in the latest collection of her stories in English translation, *A Red-necked Green Bird* (2021) as well. While the dominant motifs in this collection—for instance, the journey and music—make interesting connections with Ambai's earlier graph, the versatile and intricate reverberations in the present volume are truly amazing, offering a brilliant weaving of familiar motifs in a refreshingly revealing mode almost like an *alapana* of one's favourite *ragam* with a hitherto unexpected depth.

A significant motif in Ambai's stories has been the quest, often presented through journeys undertaken by the narrator, culminating in a renegotiation of relationships, spaces or levels of awareness for multiple characters in a story—in this context, one of her early stories *Velipadu* readily comes to mind. Similarly, in the present collection, most of the stories reflect either an inward or an actual journey. In fact, three out of the thirteen stories simply carry the title 'Journey 21', '22', '23' but the ones capturing the traumatic, unspoken journeys of the mind offer equally rewarding pathways and destinations. The rubric of exploration, either of the self or of relationships in its myriad shades connects the stories like a thread. Love, be it filial, conjugal or beyond socially-defined contours, is another core value that binds this volume and the stories it contains. Death pervades many stories, leaving behind guilt, regret, death-wish, a gracious acceptance of its inevitability or its ferocious and orchestrated manifestation targeting an entire community. It is a recurring motif that alerts the readers to grasp its pervasive presence. Despite this, the stories remain unquestionably life-affirming—celebrating love, compassion, friendship and relationships that sustain an individual's dignity rather than constrain it.

These stories find a way to defy space and time, criss-crossing through the prism of class, gender and regions effortlessly, reinforcing the predicaments, choices and aspirations within the realm of the human and the fallible, yet possible to recover and forge new bonds rather than hold on to the ritually-ordained ones. Many of the stories are about the aged, the perception regarding the process of ageing and the joy of experiencing age-defying love and companionship. The numerous birds that dot the terrain of these tales hold forth varied notions of human bonds and the process of disengaging with them on one's journey to find or travel beyond the self. The crow with a swollen throat that yokes a daughter's memories of caring for her father who was a foodie, a music lover struggling with loss of memory, straining to wade through 'a dense forest that hides all paths'. It is a moving tale of a middle-class woman, a principal of a college who has to turn away from love so that she may devote her energy to taking care of her old, Alzheimer-scarred father. The wafting of music and the aroma of snacks described mark the sensuous beauty of the body and the pressures on the changing roles of the father-daughter bond ('The Crow with a Swollen Throat'). The pressures of caring for the aged takes its toll on the care provider in yet another way as we watch

the seventy-five-year-old Urmila committing suicide, unable to care for her ninety-five-year-old bed-ridden mother-in-law. Kamli's sixty-year-old intellectually challenged sister-in-law tending to her old mother is equally heart-rending. Juxtaposed to these bonds of love and care is the bond of empathy between Kamli, a college principal and her maid Kammu, whose dispossession from her home and the loss of her father's secure job at a mill paves the way for the mushrooming of apartment blocks where she gets to work as a maid. Songs of resistance that fail to stop the dispossession of the workers at the behest of real-estate sharks reverberate with the fire that burnt down the indigenous inhabitants in order to build the capital city of the Pandavas. The yoking of the mythical and the social trajectory, the suffering and the compassion of the women across the class and caste divide elevate the story 'The City that Rises from Ashes' to a powerful critique of the political and financial ruling elite.

'Journey 21' is reminiscent of Ambai's story 'Squirrel' in its imaging of a godown of a government building that houses unpublished manuscripts and unsold books of artists and activists in the most callous way possible. Books dumped in a haphazard way, awaiting their turn to be thrown 'in the garbage' or be burnt down tell their own story within the story about a classical dancer on a journey down memory lane or that of her daughter's journey to Delhi to track her mother's autobiography amidst the heap of bureaucratic mismanagement.

Refreshing images and insights emerge in almost each of the stories in the collection but in particular, 'Falling', '1984', 'The Pond' 'A Red-necked Green Bird' and 'Swayamvars with no Bows Broken' are stories that are remarkable in their imaging of the ageing, the vulnerable and the resilient women who come alive to warm our hearts. Kamala decides to end her life rather than compromise with her notion of love, careful while jumping off the balcony that 'her spine shouldn't break'. The warmth of friendship between Malar and Harpreet acts as a balm on the chasm and friction that emerged after the 1984 massacre of Sikhs; the story evolves as a testimony and report on the riots by survivor(s), their unrelenting trauma and the political collusion in the criminal splintering of community bonds. Gender re-configurations, whether in the physical plane as in 'The Pond' or in the subversion of stereotypes as in 'Swayamvars' offer delightful explorations of social, cultural tropes with wit and humane warmth. The puckish humour in 'The Horsewoman' or the thrill of sci-fi in 'The Lion's Tail' expands the canvas of appeal to the larger reading public.

GJV Prasad's translation of these stories is a treat to readers as it captures the cultural nuances and the feminine/feminist narratorial voice most authentically and earnestly. Ambai's characteristic short and rhythmic sentences, her wry, pithy wit and her frequent and multiple references to music and poetry are brilliantly grasped and conveyed in English by Prasad. The references cut across languages, genres and periods and Prasad's rendition in English is a commendable and enviable feat. Lyrics from Hindi movies translated in English read like vivid poems with a life of their own even as they emerge as a faithful translation of the original text! The creative fecundity is amply evident in the translated sections pertaining to poetry, songs and snatches of *kritis*. The most challenging aspect of translating Ambai's stories is in doing justice to the generous sprinkling of poetry from across the ages. The poet-translator Prasad accomplishes this with a splendid flourish and does not let them stand out as purple patches but fuses them well with the flow of the narrative. Rendered in English, the poetry of Aandal, Manikavasagar, Subrahmanian Bharati, Tamizh film songs, snatches of Purandaradasa, verses from the Gurbani, Harbhajan Singh's poetry, Bahinabai's

songs, Hindi film songs—Prasad has enriched the English language and showed us its malleability and scope for fluidity, hitherto unexplored with so much brilliance and discernment.

*To remain together
In life and death
Is but a dream
Give up this dream
Nobody dies with you*

Prasad's masterful translation and deft assimilation of lyricism and thought, of rhythm and pause is evident in instances like this song from *Chitrlekha* evoking Mohammad Rafi's haunting voice or Sahir's cryptic line 'koi na sang mare'. The song is invoked by Ambai to mirror Mythili's resolve to let Vasanthan embark upon his solitary journey, releasing him from claims of her love and conjugal bond in *A Red-necked Green Bird*. This story is evidently the jewel in the crown of this collection for its candid and compassionate depiction of human expectations, disappointments, quiet affirmations and uncompromising resistance to irrational commands of the traditional-minded—both institutions and individuals. The story's depiction of disability from the perspective of the disabled as well that of the non-disabled, subjects the debate over disability to a critical and revealing enquiry. Re-claiming her agency, Thenmozhi affirms her decision to communicate without sound or words. The hegemonising of language and of spoken language, in particular, is given the flip by Thenmozhi by her preference to use the sign language, a universal tool of communication for the speech- and hearing-challenged persons like herself and Edwin. The story experiments in form as well by affixing a lyrical, prose essay as a postscript even as it interplays the dream, the surreal, the actual journey and the inward quest for freedom. The notion of freedom, of course, remains different for the three members of this family.

Ambai's stories invariably reflect a creative and critical enquiry into social and personal spaces. Prasad's lucid translation allows readers to understand and fully appreciate such explorations.