

RAJESWARI - A BOOK REVIEW

(By Janaki Sastry)

If there is any story that dwells into the heart and soul of a young bride, it is Rajeswari. Abandoning her studies and musical lessons, the teen-bride enters her new life determined to make it a success.

The mother-in-law's callous comment that "Rajeswari is used to hard work", typically reveals the attitude of the women in that household about their new bride. At the age of fifteen, the tenderly raised Rajeswari struggles to please her mother-in-law and her obnoxious sister-in-law who uses her as skivvy to wait upon her, day and night.

The novel is a social history, depicting the social taboos and conditions of the early 20th century. It deals with child-marriages - quite the trend in those days - and a family circle eager to make adverse comments on the new bride without considering her feelings. Often those comments were personal and digging through the soul of a young 'victim'. In all this, the young wife wishes for her husband's moral support. Once again, the traditions come into their way; in an extended family the son never openly supports his wife. The unemployed groom with his own complexes along with his own linguistic prejudices taunts his bride for being brought up in a 'foreign land' as such and to have learnt music taught by a Telugu teacher. He remains mute to the situation at home and ignores his young wife.

In spite of all family hassles, the young Rajeswari longs to promote her musical talent in the land of 'Music City', Madras. She yearns for an opportunity to attend at least *one* music concert-which remains a dream for her. When she finally breaks down and makes her feelings public, she gets labeled as 'hysterical'. Her heart cries out: "I want Freedom, I want Liberty."

She seeks shelter and support at her parent's home. Warmly welcomed as a 'guest', she is politely discouraged to settle there as a 'discarded' wife. Bound by the rules of the social norms, her parents persuade their beloved daughter to return to her husband; the young woman, who was loved and cherished by her family until she was married off, now becomes redundant in her own home. Frustrated, disappointed, and with her bruised pride, she decides to go back to the same 'life' she despised and shunned - a life with no marital or domestic bliss. She pleads with her husband "to come without any further delay." He acknowledged her loving command with no hesitation and comes down to rescue her.

Rajeswari is a social study; it's a psychological analysis of a young woman who was married off at a tender age of fifteen after discontinuing her studies and foregoing her ambition to artistic dreams. Finally, she compromises, and in doing so, she heroically demonstrates tremendous maturity by facing the harsh reality of the day and enduring it with dignity

The ending leaves the reader with a dilemma: would a modern woman of India endure it all so passively? Sadly, many Rajeswaris still exist in modern India; child marriages are still practiced in some parts of India. The book leaves the reader with umpteen unanswered questions and several jumbled-up emotions about the fate of Indian women.

Besides the domestic hurdles - which most brides of India encounter in their lives - the protagonist in **Rajeswari** has to cope with emotional problems as well. I admire the way the

young writer - like a seasoned psychologist - explores the mental state of the protagonist and lets her resolve a dismal situation into an amicable one.

As a school girl I had the privilege of personally knowing the author India Devi, admired her talent and I never missed a chance to meet her. Incidentally, my maternal grandfather, Pandit W.V.V.B. Ramalingam resigned his job to join the freedom movement, and India Devi's father Prof Sundaresan was appointed in his place at the same Khallikote College of Berhampur. Whenever we visited India Devi at Cuttack she would receive us with a gentle smile. Quiet and shy, she would show her latest published Tamil short story to her *Mastergaru*. As he read the story, she would sit on the floor and eagerly watch his expressions awaiting his compliments and words of encouragement.

Rajeswari is one unique experiment into the study of psychology of human mind and endurance, and the young author excelled in her attempts to deal with the then-prevailing social norms and circumstances with evenhandedness. The story comes deep from the heart of a creative artist, so the question whether it is a biography or not is totally irrelevant.

The author weaves the narrative with a deep insight: we first encounter Rajeswari with childish innocence bordering on naïveté; she finally emerges ripe and matured; only a versatile writer could succeed - with a stroke of pen - in unraveling that mind and heart

Rajeswari is a masterpiece of young India Devi alias *Vindhiya*.

JANAKI SASTRY is the author of, *RAASTA* (2010) and *HE LET GANDHI INTO HIS LIFE* (2014), a narrative history of her grandfather W.V.V.B. Ramalingam, affectionately called **Masterji**, one of Mahatma Gandhi's most devoted followers. The biography spanning five generations of Ramalingam family was recognized as " a touching, human story about standing up for what is right." In the Eighties the author published stories for children in the popular Reading Scheme for Primary Children, called **STORY CHEST**; she has also published *PASIDI MANASULU*, an anthology of her short stories in Telugu, her mother tongue.

Janaki Sastry lives in London. She has recently completed working on short stories about her hometown Berhampur and is looking for a publisher.