

## Chronicler of Mahe goes global

**The Train That Had Wings (Stories) by**

**M. Mukundan**

Translated by **Donald R. Davis Jr.**



**K. Kunhikrishnan**

The celebrated Malayalam writer **M. Mukundan** is credited with heralding a new existentialist and creative literary anarchy in the 60s. He experimented with themes, locales and forms and evolved a new genre of writing influencing the young readership in a period when crisis of identity and sense of disillusionment and alienation loomed large. The writings were notable deviations from the then existing styles and were trend setters, with tales of love, frustration and futility of quest. They were heavily influenced by foreign literature and philosophy. In Mukundan's early stories differences between form and content were very thin and he heavily experimented with form. This won him laurels and appealed to all generations of readership. Slowly, Mukundan got rid of any alien influences and evolved himself into a master on craft and narrative, retaining his basic skill and style. His fiction, both short and long, had elements of painting, sculpture, music and dance and the detached but dramatic view of life, which sometimes shocked the reader. His canvas became unique and the locales shifted from the nostalgia of the rustic elements of Mahe (where he was born), to the bustling multitude of the city of Delhi (where he worked), with rampant crimes, and the nobody-cares attitude, where humanity has lost sensitivity.

The stories in this collection represent the typical writings of Mukundan and his evolution from an unsure novice to a mature writer of immense depths. They are translated to suit an international reader, with the nuances of the regional idiom in tact to a large extent. This is no small achievement as the translation has been done by a reputed writer, in his own right. The selection includes a profile representing Mukundan's stories over a period of time including his best, good and the not so good stories. A western reader will be in a position to appreciate the form, content and craft of Mukundan's stories and how his craft evolved over a period of time, from that of a greenhorn to a brilliant narrator. They are realistic, existentialistic, psychedelic and parabolic stories, and within the gamut of range and variety in short fiction. He is satirical and laughs at the society which is incredibly insensitive and at the hypocrisies and pretensions that the societies display universally.

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Mukundan's' stories transcend time, symmetry, and geographic barriers. The atlas of his fiction largely remains Delhi and erstwhile French territory of Mahe (Mayyazhi), but they have a global appeal. Stories are centered on characters, events and settings that a foreign reader may not find strange. They are modernist in themes and Indian in context. The stories also articulate a modernist vision of cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitanism is that of suffering and emotional alienation, suggesting that humans are united by experiences of personal loss, social awkwardness, institutional oppression, and evil. However the modernism is more slanted to the darker side of life.

There are 16 stories in the collection with a critical introduction, which could have been edited out as it is repetitive on several occasions. The collection includes a few pieces where Mukundan has written to experiment with form and the abstractness, as in some modern paintings, fails to evoke the kind of intense sensitivity that his better pieces do. The better ones emote the minds and leave the reader munching over and a lot is left for the imagination.

Loss of identity is a pet theme of Mukundan. It denotes the loss of purpose or value, exposing socially bankrupt social roles or situations. Atypical one is the story, "Radha, Just Radha" the character is depicted with her entangled social occupational and religious or family lives. The resultant senseless evokes a universal appeal. Another remarkable story is "Tonsured Life". Here Mukundan indicts religious leaders, who are not only self serving but also totally inhuman. In the story, "I, the scavenger" is yet another portrayal where the unconventional idiom comes to play. It is a strong exposition of the contempt that the night soil workers receive socially and the humanitarian aspect of their lives.

The introduction states that the " the risks that Mukundan takes in his short stories merit an audience beyond speakers of Malayalam because they represent an example of the largely unknown achievements of contemporary authors.....because of their profound impact on subsequent writing." He also confesses having had to "change the literal nuances". This has made the stories to appeal to a global reader, perhaps for the first time In Malayalam, for which Mukundan can really be proud of.

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