

Classic Poetry Series

Shreekumar Varma
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Shreekumar Varma(1955 -)

Shreekumar Varma is an Indian author, playwright, newspaper columnist and poet, known for the novels Lament of Mohini (Penguin, 2000), Maria's Room (Harper Collins, 2010), Devil's Garden: Tales Of Pappudom (Puffin, 2006), The Magic Store of Nu-Cham-Vu (Puffin, 2009) and the historical book for children, Pazhassi Raja: The Royal Rebel (Macmillan, 1997). He is the great great grandson of the artist Raja Ravi Varma and grandson of Regent Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, the last ruling Maharani of Travancore.

Biography

Varma was born in 1955 in Satelmond Palace, Poojapura, Thiruvananthapuram. His parents left Kerala and settled down in Madras when he was four. He studied in the Good Shepherd Convent, the Madras Christian College High School and the Madras Christian College, from where he completed his MA and in English Literature. He also did a course in Journalism from the Bhavan's College of Journalism and Mass Communication. He took part in plays in school and college, and also participated in and devised programmes for All India Radio. He worked for the Indian Express and the Film Industry Journal (renamed Cinema Today) in Bombay. Back in Madras, he was associated with a printing press, as well as a publishing and creative training unit. He taught English Literature and Journalism at the Madras Christian College. He was a charter member and President of the Rotary Club of Madras Southwest. His mother is the Matriarch of the Travancore Royal Family.

He lives in Chennai, and is a full-time writer and adjunct professor at the Chennai Mathematical Institute. He is married to Geeta and has two sons, Vinayak and Karthik. He is a cousin of artist Rukmini Varma.

Literary works

His novels include Lament of Mohini (Penguin) and Maria's Room (Harper Collins). His books for children include Pazhassi Raja: The Royal Rebel (Macmillan), Devil's Garden (Puffin) and The Magic Store of Nu-Cham-Vu (Puffin). The Magic Store of Nu-Cham-Vu and "Maria's Room" are also available as digital "talking" books for the blind and the dyslexic.

His two award-winning plays, The Dark Lord (directed by Vinod Anand) and Bow Of Rama (dir. Noshir Ratnakar), were staged by The British Council (1986) and The Madras Players (1993) respectively. His play, Platform, was staged by The

Madras Players in January 2005. (dir. N. S. Yamuna) His play *Midnight Hotel* (Madras Players) had ten shows in Chennai and Bangalore in March, April, May and August 2009. It raised more than ₹ 40 lakhs for the social service programmes of the Christian Medical College, Vellore. (dir. Mithran Devanesen) His play *Nathu's Dream* (Bala Vidya Mandir) was produced as a musical in September 2010. (dir. Neeta Shrikanth) His political play *Five* (Thespian en) was performed as supper theatre to a packed Chennai audience in November 2010 (dir. Ajit Chitturi). His play *Cast Party* premiered to full houses in March 2012. It was produced by The Madras Players and Boardwalkers and directed by Michael Muthu.

He has written regular columns for *The Hindu*, *The New Indian Express*, *The Economic Times Madras Plus*, *Ritz Magazine*, *Fiji Times*, *Chennai Times* and the *Deccan Herald*.

He has contributed poetry, fiction and non-fiction to several anthologies, including Poetry Society of India volumes, *Aesthetica Quarterly Review*, *Pulse Berlin Magazine*, *A Hudson View Poetry Digest*, *Where The Rain Is Born: Writings from Kerala* (Penguin), *The Puffin Book of Poetry for Children*, *the Puffin Book of Funny Stories*, *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (Penguin), *A Cup Of Chai & Other Stories* (Unisun Publications), *Favourite Stories for Boys* (Puffin), *Bring Down The House Lights* (The Madras Players), *Tonight: An Anthology of World Love Poetry* (The Poets Printery, East London, S. Africa), *Kerala Kerala, Quite Contrary* (Rupa Publications), *Get Smart: Writing Skills* (Puffin), *Chicken Soup For The Indian Spiritual Soul* (Westland), *Why We Don't Talk* (Rupa), *Dark Moon Rising* (Puffin), *Urban Voice 04* (Leadstart), *Funny Stories for 7-year olds* (Puffin) and *Only Men Please* (Unisun).

He has translated poetry and fiction from the original Malayalam into English for the OUP Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writings in Translation (Oxford University Press).

Awards and recognitions

He was awarded the Charles Wallace Fellowship for the year 2004, and was Writer-in-Residence at Stirling University, Scotland.

His debut novel *Lament of Mohini* was Longlisted for the Crossword Book Award. It featured on the Asian Age Top Ten List.

His novel *Maria's Room* was Longlisted for the inaugural Man Asia Literary Prize (2007). It featured on the India Today Top 20 List.

His children's book *The Magic Store of Nu-Cham-Vu* was Shortlisted for the Vodafone Crossword Book Award 2009.

His poetry was used as text for the dance recitals Vamshi and Monsoon by noted Bharatanatyam exponent Indira Kadambi.

His play "The Dark Lord" was awarded II prize in the British Council South India Playwrights Competition.

His play "Bow of Rama" won first prize in The Hindu All-India Playscripts competition.

His play "Deep Inside" (re-titled "Midnight Hotel" for performance) was Longlisted for the first MetroPlus Playscripts competition.

His play "Platform" was selected to launch the 50th year celebrations of The Madras Players, India's oldest running English theatre group.

He was on the Jury of the Karadi Tales and Deccan Herald short story contests, and the inaugural The Hindu Fiction Award, as well as the Prakriti Foundation poetry competition.

Beyond The Sensuous

the earth contused once, i was born;
a sublime sky spread out in aesthetic colours-
i was a pioneer, touching the right chords,
breaking out in fearless pursuit of reasons.

when i died after my whimsical voyage,
the sky remained frozen, pale with frangipani ribbons-
beyond the sensuous now, in my memory
the wounded earth still breaks out in seasons.

Shreekumar Varma

Dusk

when the sun dips as if forever,
when streaks of feeling
silver the horizon's brow
and the waves start up in excitement,
frothing and insatiable,
my thoughts betray me
and i can barely feel the world...

Shreekumar Varma

Its Too Hot Outside!

whenever someone complains
of travel sickness
or the rash, its always with the hope
of a better summer next time around.
we in the chill of nondoing
have no experience of the sun,
we freeze in complicated postures,
silent in our disapproval,
yet content to remain.

we who have no birthing pangs
or yearning fangs,
we who haven't tasted blood as yet,
what do we know of idle splashing,
what do we know of sickness and rash?

upside-down, inside out and cold
like embalmed bats,
our silence reaches longer
than your screams.

Shreekumar Varma

Let Me...

let me hold you while you laugh,
there's a saying in our parts
that tears revive the past but harden the present,
let me hold you while your breasts are forming
and your lips are waiting, and the future's forming
within our sulky bowers, beneath our molten skies
that watch and judge and witness the precious
moments of our togetherness blooming into love.
let me drink in tribute to the soldiers
who've marched before us, showing us the way.
let me be.
as you will be.

i carry your memory even as i sit beside you;
breathing life into old images, interiorising your face.
like a pilgrim annoints ancestors from pots of purity,
i pour versions of you back at yourself in the hope
of touching you on the quick of our oneness;
i watch faces of strangers crossing the street
passing my life like you, turning back to smile.
i carry that moment even as i sit beside you;
like a pilgrim heaving his bundle of faith
and nothing else.

i wonder, even as i drink coffee
and abandon newspapers yet again,
and settle down to question the clear white screen
seeking words and moments, faces and bondings
that aren't so ready-made as you think.
we have our own moments of consummate summation,
when the muse hesitates, confused;
a writer's world isn't filled by words but by the silence
of words, so there, you have it even as you
hug the dark corner picking off-coloured
beads scattered all over our predicament;
it's not a happy world, but a seeking one,
never brought to fruition but by completing
the circle of life like my arms reaching around
yet losing you each time by that hairs-breadth between fingers.

i wonder still.

Shreekumar Varma

Love Song

Who knows
what visceral vistas of pain
will lead me to you
in your mist-shrouded
mount of passion
I will, one day,
pause for that moment
wrench reality from
trembling dreams
Sweat-drunk nights I've crushed
visions into the darkness
pounding past the fertile womb
of your threshold
My limbs ache for your hold
the cold touch on my writhing
your silver gaze will draw me
uncombatant to your hypnotic void
Lover, wife, cruel mistress
the night's far with you
your smile soaks in pangs
of endless lovers' vows
Waves devour oceans of sand
as we churn our wail of love
processing progeny worlds ahead
Orphans of another night
I feel immanence
in the moment's lurch
Time's drawing close
aching for consummation
lover, death.

Shreekumar Varma

Nameless

My life, I see, is a period of darkness
singed by lonely flashes,
I lie as if in a hospital bed
run through with tubes from each pretence-
Down the road there are grey crowds
at every turning
and the sky sags heavily each time I look up.

Shreekumar Varma

Night At The Marina

He plucks a flower from her hair
finds her soul embedded;
'I'd rather have a flat for us,
what will your father spare?'
The waters crunch into the night
soaking up a tremble,
She takes his hand upon her cheek
'I haven't had a bite.'
The moon is pale upon her smile;
stomach gives a rumble.
She bites her hunger back a while-
fingers start to fumble.
A mighty fort two marchers seize
set proud upon her breast;
A voice shatters all their ease:
'My groundnuts are the best!'
The grinning fellow settles there
but sees the marchers flee
she pounces down upon his ware
with barely hidden glee.
The stars are witness to the act
a brittle tune awakes
Amidst the ocean of the crowd
it's passion mixed with tact.

Shreekumar Varma

Projector

In a hall where curtains crush the last sunrays,
they wait in semi-silent stupor-
hundreds, facing a white bright screen;
kindred, as they share a dream.

no-one notices me; the screen sparkles to life
and the story begins, spouting from my eye
through a magic ray slicing the night-
image quickens and becomes life.

i regurgitate film and fool their senses,
throwing up carefully crafted scenes of life;
of people and places and slices of happiness,
humour and song with chestheaving sighs.

shut your eyes, you'll know what i mean;
the darkness mothers your every dream.
there's hero and villain and ravishing bride,
and love in the midst of punishing pride!

so leave them with their popcorn and tears;
they're safe in their ignorance.
when they know light, when they know me,
it's time for deliverance.

Shreekumar Varma

Ref-Rain

as silence drops like rain on river
helpless lives sail by, wild-wailing
their woes- the heart alone beats in a
universe of stillness; have you heard the
moon laugh on a cloudy night, secretly,
at the vast, terrible, scattered knowledge of man
presuming cosmic insight-
when all reason writhes in rhyme
and healing often comes
in a single dropp of rain.

Shreekumar Varma

Triumvirate

Tripletting from our own heads
we brought them forth as gods;
wiseheaded, river-berating, caressmiling-
universes in a three-palm.
mantranting priests, born-grown-died
and vapourised again,
recognised the cyclic vision of being and nonbeing-
contemprying sages, all of us.
filling empty pages,
shivering with the icicles of birth that will,
in the end, puncture life away,
in the agglomeration of joyous dark.

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