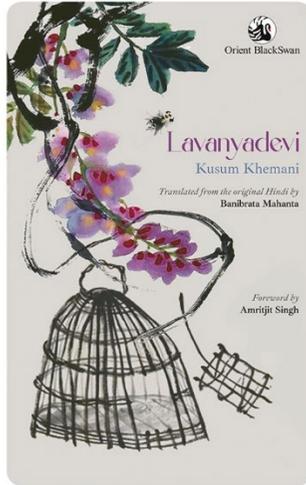


## Review

# Lavanyadevi: An Epitome of Perfection?

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*Book Review by Somdatta Mandal*



**Title: Lavanyadevi**

**Author: Kusum Khemani (Translated from Hindi by Banibrata Mahanta)**

**Publisher: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited**

*Lavanyadevi* is an award-winning 2013 novel by Kusum Khemani written in Hindi that chronicles five generations of a traditional aristocratic Bengali zamindar family as it transitions into modernity from British India to the present with the eponymous protagonist as its principal focus. Lavanyadevi—a compelling woman of perfection, extraordinary vision, qualities, and grace—remains real and credible because she is self-aware, self-critical, open to others, and to change. As a Marwari (people originally belonging to Marwar in Rajasthan) living in Kolkata, in Khemani’s fiction the schisms between ‘Bengali’ and ‘Marwari’ blur to reveal a delightfully plural, composite, and distinctively Indian ethos. *Lavanyadevi* is a story about women and their search for self, about shared laughter and friendships that endure across generations, beliefs and cultures—between mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, and Marwari and Bengali women. Khemani’s women protagonists are strong, clear-sighted, both worldly and sublime, embodying a larger-than-life idealism while being grounded firmly in the everyday.

In his introduction to his novel *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao had defined it as a [sthala-purana\[1\]](#), which he defined as a “legendary history” in which the old lady narrator in the village took recourse to the traditional Indian narrative technique, digressed at will to bring forth her point. Somehow the way Kusum Khemani takes recourse to multiple narrative techniques in *Lavanyadevi* and binds the different digressive stories and incidents into one contiguous whole when she tells us about the

history of five generations of the Bengali zamindar family, reminds one of Raja Rao's theory. She uses diverse narrative strategies like flashbacks, diaries, letters and emails, history, memory and the third person narrator to enrich its telling, lending it depth and range. A large part of the narrative revolves around telling us about past history when Lavanyadevi manages to lay her hands on her mother Jyotirmoyidevi's diaries and finds great pleasure and thrill of reading one's own family history. Not only do they offer a wonderful eye-witness account of the private and public sphere of Kolkata of those times, but they also make her easy transition into reading about her mother's youth, her elaborate description of her magnificent wedding and the rituals that spread over almost a month.

The diary as metanarrative and the protagonist as reader/narrator are particularly effective, offering a telescopic perspective. Though at times it rambles a bit, the polyphonic structure of the novel engages Lavanyadevi the granddaughter, the daughter, the wife, the mother and the grandmother in conversations with her preceding and her succeeding generations. One must sometimes go back to the family tree and chart provided at the beginning of the novel to place people in proper perspective.

From the very beginning of the novel, Khemani portrays the character of Lavanyadevi in superlatives and this continues in different phases of her life till the end when she decides to remain incognito in the mountain ashram and yet control the lives of her descendants, well-wishers and others. From a child who always stood first in school and remained wholly ignorant of the real world, to her unusual marriage to a gentleman who moved over to Rangoon and then to London where she acquired many more degrees, till she came back to Kolkata, to rear her three children successfully, she seemed to excel in everything. This is how she is described at one place:

"Lavanyadevi was indefatigable. She administered the work of several institutions, her college and her home efficiently and with ease. She was never seen to panic. She was like Goddess Durga with her many hands – untiring in her zeal, handling all her duties unfailingly, responsibly and meticulously. No one could ever complain of being ignored by her. She loved all and treated everyone with the same degree of love and warmth. Scrupulous and hardworking, always upholding truth, Lavanyadevi was the unmatched standard of excellence in all aspects of life, her words worth their weight in gold."

After judiciously assigning different welfare projects in the city as well as in far-flung places like Dhaka and the hills in Uttarkashi from the immense money she inherited from the family, and after her husband's demise, Lavanyadevi decided it was time for her to leave the family premises and go and live in an ashram in the hills. There she did not stay in hibernation but her travels for work grew even more frenetic.

From the very beginning her rootedness and belief in the philosophical framework of Hinduism formed the core of her being. They propelled her to seek answers to questions of *satya* (truth) and *mukti* (liberation) that confronted her in the latter half of her life. She decided to transcend immediate personal concerns and address larger universal issues. Her transition from *grihastha* (householder) to *sanyasa* (renunciate) harkens back to the Hindu ideal of human life divided into four phases. However, contrary to the conception of life in isolation, Lavanyadevi, free of any kind of worldly considerations in this final phase of life, marshaled material and human resources to create a strong network of *seva* (social service) across the country and even beyond its borders. The list of her welfare schemes is too long to mention in the purview of this review, but ranged from renovating brothels in Kolkata's red-light areas, creating self-help centres for rural women in Dhaka, de-addiction centres, eco-friendly schools in the hills, organic farming in South India, etc.

In the latter half of the novel, we find Lavanyadevi successfully transmitting her values and ideals to her children and grandchildren who are called the “Saptarshi Mandal friends” and who carry her legacy forward and emphasise that progress does not always mean breaking from the past. Here the novelist becomes too idealistic and brings in too many issues that seem a bit far-fetched. Issues of inter-caste and inter-religious relationships apart, the list of social welfare missions seems endless. Her “soul-children” unobtrusively usher in change and create space for diversity in relationships and ways of living. Harmonious cohabitation with nature became the foundational principle of all the education centres she built in the hills but the way she invisibly controls the activities of all her soldiers through emails and emphasises the middle path of life makes the advocacy of humanitarian concerns a bit overemphasised. She becomes larger than life for ideas and wish-fulfilment.

A Hindi novel about a Bengali family by a Marwari woman from Kolkata became significant when it was commissioned for translation into English. Winner of the PEN/Heim Translation Grant 2021, the jury called *Lavanyadevi* an ‘ambitious, far-reaching’ novel, lauding Khemani’s ‘energetic prose, deadpan sense of humor, and exquisite control’, and Banibrata Mahanta’s translation that ‘stretches and manipulates language to produce a vivid text’ and a must-read for lovers of Indian literature. Here one needs to mention the seriousness with which Mahanta gives us the ‘Translator’s Introduction’ at the beginning of the text and again ‘Translator’s Note’ at the end. This reviewer feels that both these could have been combined into one general essay highlighting the significance of the evolution of the Marwaris in Bengal, how Khemani’s novel is a hybrid artefact born out of multiple linguistic and cultural encounters, how the characters in the novel speak in languages other than Hindi produces dialogues in Bangla, Marwari, Haryanvi or Punjabi; and how between a breezy translation and a linguistically nuanced one, wherever possible the translator has eschewed the former and gone for the latter. As he rightly admits, translating this complex narrative into global or even a pan-Indian English is always risky, but Mahanta should be given due credit for overcoming all obstacles and bringing this immensely readable novel to a wide readership.

[1] Ancillary texts to Puranic literature

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