

Book Review

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| Title | : | Vazhga Vazhga and Other Stories |
| Author | : | Imayam |
| Publisher | : | Penguin Books |
| Year | : | 2023 |
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Tamil writer Imayam's new collection 'Vazhga Vazhga and Other Stories' published by Penguin Books (2023) offers a revealing showcase of the author's remarkable narrative range. This compilation of three stories featuring a hard-hitting political novella, a mystical tale, and a philosophical mythic reimagining, highlights the writer's ability to infuse diverse genres and subjects with his signature realist voice. Beautifully translated into English by Prabha Sridevan, this trifecta offers an excellent introduction to Imayam's fictional world and his mastery over the language.

Vazhga Vazhga, the title story delivers a devastating punch to those in authority by poignantly portraying the plight of commoners during election rallies. Through intricately crafted irony and unflinching social realism, Imayam exposes the casual exploitation and trauma lurking beneath the spectacle of political gatherings. The story follows Aandal, a poor woman who is tempted by local party worker Venkatesa Perumal's offer of five hundred rupees and a free saree if she attends a massive rally held by the party leader referred to as 'Thalaivi'. Amidst the carnival atmosphere of festive crowds, blaring songs and giant cutouts, Aandal soon realizes she has been swindled into an oppressive ordeal. As crowds swell dangerously out of control, barricades collapse, leading to a nightmarish stampede that claims Aandal's life along with other women. But the rally proceeds uninterrupted, and the 'Thalaivi' continues her speech despite the loss of lives.

Imayam lays bare the callousness of power and the alarming dispensability of the marginalized poor in the grand project of political ambition. His great skill is in structuring the entire narrative on different layers of irony that ultimately illuminate the cruelty of the climax. The very title 'Vazhga Vazhga', meaning 'Long Live' in Tamil, is a common chant heard in political rallies. By irony, this phrase that connotes a celebratory wish for a long life instead becomes the soundtrack to the deaths of Aandal and other

innocent villagers. Dramatic irony is also employed via the conversational exchanges between Aandal and her friend Sornam, which become dark, uncanny premonitions of the unfolding disaster. When Sornam asks "Who will come and die in this heat?" she is unaware her words will prove fatally prophetic. The horrific climax operates on multiple symbolic levels to indict the corrupt machinery of power. Most crucially, Thalaivi's ongoing speech over the carnage reveals the delusional solipsism of the political class, concerned solely with image over reality. Imayam's masterful use of irony and polyphonic narration elevates the novella to a profound level of indictment.

The second story 'Tiruneeru Sami' narrates the mythical story of a Tamil local deity of the same name through Annamalai, a Tamil scientist working in Delhi. He is determined to have his children's tonsure ceremony performed before his native village deity Tiruneeru Sami. His North Indian wife Varsha and her mother rejects this local god as childish superstition. A heated argument ensues. Unexpectedly, Varsha's brother Alok develops a fascination with Tiruneeru Sami as Annamalai explains the deity's mythic backstory and his teachings. Imayam explores the friction between localized folk worship and dominant religion through a conversational narrative arc and criticise the growing corporatisation of religion. The concluding story 'Samban, Son of Krishna - An Untold Tale' offers a philosophical reimagining of the classic myth of Samban. Cursed by his father with leprosy, Samban journeys on the advice of the sage Narada to worship the sun god Surya, hoping for a cure. But as Samban spends time in deep penance and prayer, his priorities shift. Rather than a cure for his physical affliction, Samban seeks freedom from his mind's desires and attachments. Imayam deftly charts Samban's inner transformation, from a handsome warrior concerned with outer appearance, to a renunciate focused only on transcending the self. By diving into Samban's psychology, Imayam's insightful rewrite deepens and modernizes this classical tale. The quest for enlightenment replaces the search for a magical cure. Imayam thus infuses familiar myth with original philosophical meaning.

Starting with a scathing indictment of political exploitation through the story of tragedy at an election gathering in *Vazhga Vazhga*, followed by a mystic journey into the legend of a local deity in 'Tiruneeru Sami' and closing on a philosophical high note with speculative reworking of the mythical story of Samba, this collection stands as a testimony to Imayam's versatility in realism and his portrayal of the human condition in the Indian scene.

Kathiravan Annamalai