

HAMMOCK



CULTURE

FICTION

ABOUT

Kariajja the Storyteller

Kum Veerabhadrappa, translated by Srikar Raghavan

Translator's Note:

I came upon this tale in a collection of fifty short stories that some of Kum Vee's doting fans had curated to commemorate their beloved storyteller's seventieth birthday. This particular tale, about a storyteller who stops telling stories, turned into a sustained

meditation on what might be, for his fans (including myself), a dreaded contingency. What fascinated me most was how the story wove multiple historical layers into its narrative. The ostensible setting was some unspecified mid-twentieth-century moment, but it reflected a much larger, centuries-long historical process that underpins the complex relationship between art and its patrons. The story is set in an unspecified North Karnataka boondock, but the story's core predicament - of a mute storyteller - expands the theme into a universal concern. In translating this, I have endeavoured to retain the sociological markers of the tale, which are rooted in time and space, but have also tried to capture the timelessness of the storyteller-protagonist, who is more allegorical than meets the eye. KumVee's prose is both humorous and linguistically inventive, and the narrative is richly-detailed. I have tried to recreate this vivid wordscape as well.

I

It did not take long in that small village consisting of a few score houses, where everyone grimaced at the faintest of malodors, for people to begin wondering why Kariajja had stopped telling stories.

How can he stop telling stories?

Has the man lost his mind?

Times have changed for the worse.

The rains won't arrive properly this time.

Poor fellow has grown senile.

Perhaps it is time to retreat to the forests.

To grow old is to wilt like a fruit, man.

No, as one's mind matures, stories must keep coming like arrows from an endless

quiver.

In this manner, everyone in the village began delivering their own verdicts on this unprecedented situation. Neglecting all the contingencies of their personal lives, they descended upon Kariajja's humble hut on the fringes of the village. With a bewilderment on his face that suggested that he was carrying the burden of the entire cosmos, Kariajja sat rooted to a stone platform, looking like he was lost to the void. His bleak eyes suggested that he had no will to even swat the numerous house flies hovering around his body. In front of him, an even more bewildered audience sat blank-faced on their haunches, dumbstruck.

Kariajja's head drooped onto his forehead, his forehead leaned into his eyebrows, his eyes were coeval with his cheeks, his cheeks were one with his neck, which was, in turn, intruding onto his chest. Thankfully, the chest heaved rhythmically with every breath he took. Looking like a different creature from every angle, the old man muttered a *haan* or *ho* when someone prodded him. As though seeking release from a supernatural entity stuck inside his speech-box, his mouth opened feebly every now and then.

When the village was being devastated by a plague, Kariajja had spun dozens of stories about *plague-amma*, thereby becoming an integral member of the village. He had filled his fear-stricken audience with courage, thus becoming a balm to their souls. *Plague-amma* became a veritable member of their households. Like any grandmother, mother, sister, or aunt, *plague-amma* had a belly that needed to be filled, and she would depart after taking her due...

The villagers took care of Kariajja as one of their own – is one stomach difficult for a village to feed? They generously gave him a place to live on the fringes of the village, and in any case, his legs were far too bent to perform any back-breaking work. His tongue seemed to have been specially crafted by Brahma himself. Even after narrating thousands of tales, it felt no exhaustion. He could keep at it until his audience's buttocks became one with the ground on which they were sitting! Thus, in those ancient times, when Kariajja was still not an *ajja* (old man), his relationship with the village had grown and flourished in this curious manner. And as *plague-amma* was

leaving her footsteps all around the region, she had also spat out many heaps of dry tobacco near a black stone – a divine offering to the village. On Kariajja's suggestion, the headman had distributed the tobacco all over his large farm as fertiliser, which had yielded wheat in bountiful quantities the coming year.

Some people postulated that the black stone would grow from generation to generation, and that it could even perform miracles. When everyone was asleep, these people said, the stone walked around the village and conversed with the subconscious minds of the villagers. Having no regard for these tales, Kariajja the Storyteller built a small hut right beside the stone and began living there. He then built a platform around the stone, sat on it with a chillum in hand, and puff-puffed away like a boss! The villagers concluded that Kariajja did not belong to the realm of ordinary humans, and the stone miraculously stopped its otherworldly adventures the day he began sitting on it.

More curious than the stone that made its home in Kariajja's heart is the story of how Boranahalli Talavara Chandra's daughter, Kotri, fell for his narrative gifts and married him. Like dark sesame chutney on a white jowar roti, they began living together. He would drink up his wife's radiant face and fill his belly, while she would do so by gobbling up all his stories and then burping with satisfaction! It is perhaps because the two of them became so lovestruck with each other on that stone-platform that they never managed to build a cradle within their hut.

Some like Dammadi Durugamma had boasted that every time she uncrossed her legs, a seed would unfailingly sprout in her belly. Many men, having seen the radiance of Kotri's white-jowar-roti-face, had offered themselves to her, but Kotri was not in the least bothered by the lack of offspring – after all, she was wedded to the Man of Ten Thousand Stories! That pious woman, who had recognised that the stories originating in her husband's mouth were greater than any child she might beget, had never imagined that she should ever have to entertain any man's thighs. Wearing a gown stitched from old saris discarded by the village women, she listened to her husband and travelled through all the unknown realms of the universe. For his beloved swan-like wife, Kariajja wove a new and fantastic story every day. Each of these tales offered greater joy than any sexual union. He never yearned for an heir, and he loved each

story more dearly than one would a child.

Kariajja the Storyteller delighted at the way his tales took root in others and then grew out in unanticipated ways. He was large-hearted enough to never let any story become bound to the mortars of the intellect. As soon as a story occurred to him, he released it to the wind by telling it to someone, and then he watched as it roamed the streets, free and uninhibited. Sometimes, a story came back to him completely transformed and unrecognisable, with more sub-characters and sub-plots than he imagined were even possible.

Since bull-like stories constantly assaulted cow-like ones, their offspring-stories tended to violate the villagers' minds too. Some pleasant stories, however, leapt off of people's tongues within a few days, and spread to villages and towns beyond the horizon! When these stories came back to meet Kariajja to say hello, he shied away in half-remembrance, but the people always knew who the original source was. Finding one excuse or another to visit the village, they paid their respects to Kariajja. He spoke to them with love and affection, and every word that came out of his mouth held his audience enraptured.

In order to find solutions to their problems, villagers arrived on bullock carts to his village, picked up Kariajja, made everyone in their family listen to his stories, presented him with suitable gifts, and then ceremoniously carried him back home.

By the time Kariajja became an old man, he was so popular that every important event in any household of the surrounding villages required his sanction. His stories had just as much power as any *hraam*, *hreeem* mantra. Through them, he could make three plus two equal ten, or ten plus two equal three. Once, Urukundeppa's daughter refused to marry her chosen groom because he was darker than her eyebrows. She proceeded to embark on a protest-fast. A concerned Urukundeppa took the matter to Kariajja, who sat the young woman down and then expertly narrated the story of the fair owl that had married a crow. The very next day, she did a *doosra*, and married the fellow!

Money lenders sought his help in extracting interest from errant borrowers. Young couples used his stories as inspiration to consummate their first-nights successfully. To

curb violent fits, to control errant bullocks, to diminish unexpected depression, people took recourse to his stories. In those times, in that poor hamlet, there existed no medical experts, and so Kariajja himself became one. All physical ailments vanished upon listening to his words within the click of a finger. Kulkarni Raghappa's wife Rindamma managed to survive the rigours of her ninth delivery only thanks to Kariajja.

Thus, Kariajja himself became a mythical story. Some began to posit that he sprouted wings every night, travelled to the heavens and collected stories, which is why he did not have any children. Others maintained that he was not human at all, but the remnant of an ancient-grandmother-spirit in human form, which is why there was nobody who had ever seen the man perform his ablutions! In these tales, he became a bird, an ethereal being, a demon with all sorts of mutations! Those harbouring suspicions would spend some time with him, heaving a sigh of relief after realising that he was just another mortal after all.

Discerning that Kariajja could become a great aid to his own power, Shivapooje Rudra Gowda concluded that leaving such a living legend to his own devices was improper. Around the same time, Gowda's beloved daughter, going through a period of hysteria, had returned home from her husband's village. Having believed until then that soliciting stories from a man belonging to an unknown caste would be improper, Gowda spent a whole night rethinking his position, and finally decided to call upon Kariajja for help.

As Kariajja walked to the upper-caste lane which had, for so long, kept him and his stories afar, a new story struck him with every step of his stride, and with these epiphanies he began to understand the predicaments of Gowda's homestead. Having accumulated a large pile of stories on his way, he was greeted by a warm welcome indeed, and was offered some food and drink. The hefty landlord heaved an equally hefty sigh and took in the storyteller through his fiery eyes. As though upholding a spirit of humanitarian brotherhood, he sat down next to Kariajja, held his hands, and implored – *If you somehow manage to restore my daughter's health, I will take care of you like my own son.*

As Kariajja walked into the room he was pointed towards, the headman's daughter mistook Kariajja for her estranged husband, and leapt onto him. Kariajja sat her down at two-arms' length, and exquisitely narrated the story of the golden fish that had married a constantly crying crocodile, after which the two had led a long, happy life. After many, many stories, her condition improved. Several days later, when her husband came to pick her up, she went back with him peacefully and lived a contented life.

Gowda had promised that he would take care of Kariajja like a son. And he did. Kariajja's wife now became the household's daughter-in-law. The bow-legged Kariajja could not work on their fields, and as this storyteller of ancient gifts began spending his days narrating appropriate fables to Gowda's wife and grandchildren, Kotri began working in the fields from morning to evening. Now, she had a belly full of food, and proper clothes to adorn herself with. The couple lived peacefully for a long time.

At what auspicious hour had Kariajja become Gowda's son? From that very day, Gowda's fortunes rose sky-high. Now, if anyone had to seek the old man's stories, for help or for entertainment, they first had to secure Gowda's permission. It was now considered disrespectful to listen to any story without offering remuneration, and to save the stories from getting offended by this slight, Gowda began stipulating appropriate fees for different kinds of stories. For physical ailments, astrological concerns, ghost-hauntings, and other common problems, people began adopting a standard fee structure, and would pay Gowda before consulting Kariajja. How long could this go on for? Questions began to pop up regarding how much of Gowda's earnings were being transferred to Kariajja.

Even as Kariajja was wondering how all the stories in his head had become acquired by the landlord, and how he was forbidden to enchant his audience until their hearts became full with stories, his one decent leg began to totter, and history tells us that this is when Kariajja really became old. He began mirroring History itself.

Cutting to the present, it looked as though Kariajja had assumed a sitting posture since time immemorial. He had not moved a single muscle. Like the imperial bathroom-cleaner who had partially glimpsed one inch of the princess' buttocks and lost his

senses for the rest of his life, Kariajja had become an invalid who could not even scratch his own itching body. Some thought that a change of scene might do him some good. A few hot-blooded youths wanted to lift him and take him elsewhere, but just like Bhimasena trying to lift Anjaneya's tail, it was all in vain.

Someone lift him and heave him elsewhere, man

Our Kariajja is sitting there like a rock

I told him not to sit on that stone, did he listen to me? Now look what has happened

Saying so, some young men tried to transport him, but Kariajja's wife, now an old woman, stopped them – *Ayyo, please don't do so. His body is already wilting, what if his bones break in the process?*

His eyes fixated on the void, Kariajja did not even turn to look at her. However, he was not completely incapacitated. Some internal sense was helping him make sense of the exterior world. He was trying to communicate with the cosmos at large, but it seemed to be failing. Only the previous day, a couple of oldies had travelled to the north-east direction towards which Kariajja was steadfastly looking, hoping to unearth a lost palace full of treasure and become its new owners. They were yet to return.

Gowda visited and pleaded that Kariajja return home; Gowda even bribed Kariajja with a five-acre farm that was to become his if he started telling stories again. In a moment of consternation, Kotri responded – *Do we have either a past or a future? What use is a farm, eh?* Kariajja sported a brief grin beneath his moustache, as though approving of his wife's retort. So many people wondered if this was the village's bad luck, or Kariajja's. So many people left their homes and villages to come and see him.

Kariajja the Storyteller had never collapsed in one stroke like this. He himself had never imagined that he would ever stop telling stories or devolve into a mute spectator. However, it was true that he had been feeling rather disinterested in the whole endeavour from a couple of months, often yawning in front of his audience. *Once upon a time, in a village, there lived a fellow* – even as he was beginning thus, another

story would start intruding there, and he would become tongue-tied by the hundreds of stories struggling within. His body was burdened by the stories hatching within him.

II

How can ordinary mortals understand the turmoil raging inside Kariajja? All his stories were tossing and turning over one another. Since all his orifices seemed to be blocked, the stories were engaged in a mad stampede for lack of space, like a Jallianwala Bagh of tormented souls. A General Dyer was standing in front of the only exit available to them. Anything could happen at any moment... A dark shadow of anxiety... An ominous terror... Torturous heat... Paucity of vital oxygen... A large question mark hovering over stories bubbling to a boiling-point.

The stories looked at each other, vengeance in their eyes. They all desired to live. A revolution began brewing inside Kariajja's body, and an all-pervading bloodbath took shape for no reason at all. Each story found words to espouse violence and oppression over another. Resorting to egg-laying the moment it was born, no story was less than a mosquito in its will to procreate. With no need for additional heat, the eggs hatched instantly, and those creatures tottered about on their infant legs, growing even as they tottered, burning even as they grew, bewildered by hunger even as they burned.

In that murderous rage of stampeding stories, the dust of the battlefield further rusted the doors of perception. So many stories drew their last breaths and fell to the ground, decaying in the inner recesses of his body, and a counter-reaction to find peace was finally beginning to take shape. Some stories, recognising that everyone should live in peace in the little time they had left, staged a historical revolution and organised themselves into groups according to their ability and need. If bird-stories became one under the leadership of the vulture, plants and bushes coalesced under the neem tree. In the assembly of forest stories, the fox and the tiger did engage in heated debates, but the tiger inevitably became their president, and the fox its secretary. While the spirits and ghosts elected the *brahmarakshas* (a malevolent creature from Hindu mythology)

as their lord, the water-creatures selected the crocodile as their boss. Organising under the hoods of the seven-hooded serpent, reptiles and assorted worms did not waste any time in taking out a huge protest rally.

In this way, tens of organisations banded together under their respective leaderships and conducted a spirited discussion on how best to ensure their survival. If they had to live, their master Kariajja should be able to tell stories without inhibition. What had happened to him? He was not opening his mouth to anyone. The stories of generosity and justice were what had prompted Gowda to offer him a piece of land. What justice was there in keeping all of them locked up inside his body? How long could they live inside a body that was crushing them without remorse?

All the stories collectively encroached upon the old man's orifices. Those doors, which were reeking of the decaying *navarasas* (the nine primary emotions of Indian aesthetic philosophy), proved impossible to open. When all their efforts failed, the stories fell into melancholic introspection and sat down with their hands clasped to their foreheads. With their resignation, Kariajja's inner being fell further into decline.

Emerging from that inner womb with measured steps, the *brahmarakshas* was an ambitious entity. Capitalising on the helplessness of the other stories, it put on a show of magnanimity and moved at the speed of light to win their approval. Using all its metrical and ornamental talents, it spoke in a language that strove to shake up the inner consciences of the stories: *My friends, let us become one. Only if we put pressure as one united being can Kariajja's senses bloom like the parijata tree.* The plea worked.

Soon, every single story assembled in a large hall convened by the *brahmarakshas*, where it delivered a magnificent speech. It held forth with scholarly virtuosity on why they were all indispensable at every stage of a human's life. It expounded on how stories had laboured for the welfare of the human race for thousands and thousands of years; on how humans had changed colours and turned on the stories for their own satisfaction; and on how much suffering the stories had undergone for the sake of humanity.

When the old-grandmother-spirit in the laboratory of his mind had perished, Kariajja

had even nurtured the grieving phantasm that had emerged in its wake. Moving through each and every story one after another, trying to find a home, it had suffered so much. Speaking from the position of a vice-chairman, this phantasm now emphasised the importance of democracy. Assuming the position of the chief-secretary, another spirit spoke of the necessity of Marxism under these dire circumstances. It argued that only by abandoning one's individual interests and marching as a collective force could one hope to dismantle Kariajja's blocked pores. Many stories approved of this, and bedecked in the colours of their respective organisations, shouted: *Long live Marxism!*, renting the assembly-atmosphere with their spirited cries.

Had they all not come to shelter under Kariajja in such large numbers because he had offered indiscriminate sanctuary? Now, that great man had shut them out without presenting as much as a show-cause notice. How could he turn his own mind into a prison? Young stories like them could not live in such inhospitable territory where even oxygen was growing thinner. While some of the older stories bemoaned how they would have to perish while vainly reminiscing days of a glorious past, several younger stories simply began to cry. Some broke down completely. How could they forgive this man who was not transporting them to other ears? Revenge was the only answer. Loud protests against the storyteller began to erupt. Amidst this commotion, a meaningful end to the assembly could not be found. The *brahmarakshas*, unable to find a solution, grieved at its own helplessness.

When the all-powerful *brahmarakshas* threw its hands up, the now-despondent stories started fragmenting into sub-stories, and like an infant yearning for milk, began screeching their hearts out. They could not help but break all rules and laws that had hitherto been maintained. Kariajja's insides began to shake and quiver. While the banyan tree suggested that a branch be broken off to whack the old man while he rested under its shade, the serpent proposed to bite his leg while he was walking. The fox suggested that he be draped with donkey-skin and trapped in a metal box, and the *parijata* flower vowed to swallow the storyteller when he came to smell her. The magician recommended that he be thrown into the deepest waters of the ocean, while some wayward spirit proclaimed that he must be burnt to ashes, and then snorted like tobacco-snuff. In this way, each story presented its own idea of vengeance, but none of

them dared to actually assault Kariajja's body that was wilting like a fruit. They too had something resembling a heart, a conscience.

The stories knew that Kariajja had never behaved in this way. Some stories suspected that his physical frailty might have prompted his senses to protest in this manner. Some guessed that he might be responding to modern times and registering a silent outcry. Some journeyed to his various orifices, and some to his five senses. Those stories that could boast of no particular leadership travelled to his sweat glands and tried to claw themselves out. With every passing moment of this internal pressure, Kariajja dug deeper and deeper into the stone-platform. The void upon his face looked indefatigable.

Was he even alive?!

* * *

About the Author

Kum Vee is the popular pen name of the Kannada writer **Kum. Veerabhadrappa**. He has been writing in vernacular for decades, and received the *Sahitya Akademi Award for Kannada* in 2007. He is a prolific writer, with hundreds of short stories and tens of novels to his name. This is the first translation of his work into English.

Srikar Raghavan is a writer, translator and researcher based out of Manipal. He usually finds himself yearning for the next book that will successfully tickle his funny-bone.

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