

THE BOOK REVIEW

VOLUME XLVII NUMBER 9 SEPTEMBER 2023

Tamil

மொழிபெயர்ப்பில் தமிழ்

Malayalam

പരിഭാഷയിൽ മലയാളം

Telugu

అనువాదంలో తెలుగు

Kannada

ಅನುವಾದದಲಿಕ್ಕನ್ನಡ

Marathi

मराठी भाषांतरात

English

Bengali

বাংলা অনুবাদে

Odia

ଅନୁବାଦରେ ଦୋଢ଼ିଆ ।

Hindi

हिंदी अनुवाद में

Urdu

اردو ترجمہ میں

Persian

فارسی در ترجمہ

German

Deutsch in der Übersetzung

Santali

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Tittle-Tattle of Tinigaon

Mukul Chaturvedi

WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY? A NOVEL

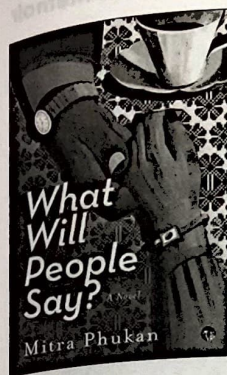
By Mitra Phukan

Speaking Tiger, 2023, pp. 287, ₹ 499.00

Small-town stories seem to be making big waves in the world of both fiction and film. Recent Bollywood films have their plot set in mofussil towns of UP, Bihar and the rural hinterlands of India. The stories are spicy, and the scope for scandal is much greater because of social strictures. The intimate world of a small town throws up characters that are identifiable because they're more rooted, making the conflict between traditional worldview and modern lifestyle much more dynamic. Set in the hillocks of Tinigaon, a small town in Assam, *What Will People Say?* draws an endearing portrait of the town with such vivid details that it captures the spirit of the place and its hold on the lives of people. The novel revolves around the life of Mihika, a 56-year-old widow, who is caught up with aspirations of living a life that meets with disapproval. What people say and think of her forms the crux of Mihika's being as she navigates her personal and professional lives.

Written in a conversational tone, *What Will People Say?* is full of dialogue, and constant chatter as people go about their everyday lives. Mihika is the talk of the town because as a widow, her relationship with Zuhayr, her deceased husband's best friend, is seen as an act of indiscretion, a crossing of social and cultural boundaries that regards widowhood as an end to a woman's desire for a fulfilling life. In fact, the novel deals with an important theme about love and companionship in old age, and how this

The intimate world of a small town throws up characters that are identifiable because they're more rooted, making the conflict between traditional worldview and modern lifestyle much more dynamic.



is seen as something out of the ordinary even in contemporary times. While Phukan has set her story in a small town that appears unforgiving of Mihika's uninhibited display of affection as she goes out with Zuhayr to concerts, restaurants, and they visit each other's homes, it's not as if this would not incur the wrath of the gossip brigade in so-called big cities.

The novel takes up all the odds that are stacked against Mihika's efforts as she tries to live life on her own terms despite being judged by others. Interestingly, it's the female gaze that seems to be sizing up Mihika's behaviour. Be it the nosy neighbour Ranjana who keeps a close watch on the 'comings and goings' in her house or the would-be mother-in-law of her daughter, Veda, Mihika is on the radar of older women as compared to the men of her age. But she is also surrounded by her friends, Tara, Triveni, Shagufta and Pallavi, her closest confidantes, and they hang out together in humid afternoons in fancy cafes, in the company of the newer, younger generation. The conversation amongst the four revolves around work, self-care, and relationship issues, mapping a shift from women of earlier generations for whom advancing age meant giving oneself up to a life of temples and prayers. The novel catches this dichotomy well where the young have almost a licence to enjoy life and seek companionship while the old are meant to live a life of neglect and rejection, more so in the case of women if they are widowed.

With the plot mainly driven by gossip amongst the characters, it feels that the book is being narrated in front of us. But there isn't much movement or action until the very end when Mihika's supposedly wayward ways seem to hamper the prospect of her daughter's marriage. The whisper networks are strong in Tinigaon, and they travel to Mumbai and disrupt plans. Strangely, there is no defying of tradition or children marrying against their parents' wishes. They shelve their plans, and continue to live together, as they have been doing in Mumbai, without their parents' knowledge. There was no real damage caused by the gossip, with each one accepting the other's relationship without the confines of marriage. The straightforward sentimentality doesn't add spice to the plot, and the gossip mongers are effectively silenced and sidelined. While the slow-paced narration conveys the rhythm of a small town, one wishes for some twists and turns, snippets of biting satire and incisive irony considering gossip is the mainstay of the storyline.

Curiously, the men in the novel, few and far between, are understanding and liberal, and surprisingly, Mihika is not subject to either unwelcome advances or censorious

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Indian Literature

Sahitya Akademi's Bimonthly Journal
January–February 2024 # 339

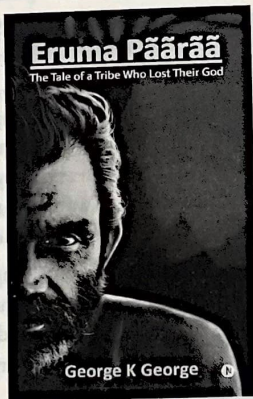


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Eruma Paaraa: The Tale of a Tribe Who Lost Their God by George K George,
 Motion Press, 2021, Pp.512, Rs.448/-

Telling stories is what makes us human. Not only do stories make us understand ourselves and others but they also serve as a crucial link to our past and how it shapes our present. Over the years storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool to reclaim lost voices, submerged narratives and empower the historically marginalized. George K George's *Eruma Paaraa: The Tale of a Tribe Who Lost Their God* is storytelling with such a purpose. Despite self-avowed claims of fictionality the narrative is steeped in myths, folklore, local stories, and uses a blend of textual and oral sources to outline the predicament of the Mala Aryan tribe who were dispossessed of their land, god, and suffered cultural erasure. A timely told tale, the novel resonates with readers in the context of the Supreme Court 2019 Sabarimala judgment that has allowed the entry of women to the temple. Following the judgement, the narrative of how Lord Ayyappan, the hunting deity of Sabarimala, who belonged to the Mala Aryans was appropriated by the Pandalam Kings has gained traction, highlighting how Brahmanical rituals and practices were introduced much later and how the hill god was hijacked and co-opted into mainstream tradition.

An intricately woven tale, the novel navigates a long journey tracing the history of Mala Aryan land, the arrival of the missionaries, Christian conversions, and the modern day discriminatory practices that impact the lives of tribal people. Following the frame and device of historical fiction, the para texts, maps and references provide ample details and locate the text firmly in the social, political and cultural landscape. *Eruma Paaraa*, the author informs us is a novel called *Erumapra*, to accommodate modern day Malayali sensibilities and



since he grew up around these hills and spent his childhood here, there is an autobiographical impulse that led to the writing of the novel. The love for the place and its people lends a poignant tone to the novel, despite the critical stance of the text towards many existing practices. Lest he be construed as an “activist or community spokesperson,” the author dissociates himself from any such tag in the author’s note at the beginning of the novel. Interestingly, there is much in the novel that would not qualify him as a spokesperson, but certainly as an astute ‘insider’, as he recreates for the reader the beautiful and magical world of the hill tribe by drawing on myths and legends that have gone into shaping the history of these indigenous peoples.

The main protagonist, Kusumom is the descendant of Taalanaani family, the oracle priest of Lord Ayyappan, and in tracing the trajectory of her life, from a little girl who is weighed down by a secret to a well-known name in the literary world, the novel recounts the trials and tribulations of a community that finds it difficult to negotiate with their dispossessed past and an alienating present. Kusumom’s surreal experiences lend a haunting quality to the narrative and despite her failings makes her an embodiment of a spirit that refuses to be cowed down in face of adversity. Looking wistfully at Kusumom, who has been humiliated by her husband, her long time friend, Johnny ruminates, “And now here she goes. Her life, really like the tale of a Tribe who lost her God, in all senses of the word. The poetess of the hills, the brilliant writer with a mind of her own, the lady who was rage among the youth of the Church and the lady with a beauty that was rarely seen on the hills, that was walking away from him.” Kusumom’s and Johnny’s journey through their various relationships, education and jobs allows the narrator to weave historical memories not only of a distant tribal past but also modern day preoccupation with issues of caste, class and religion. The novel’s skilful mix of myths and legends that masquerade as history draws the reader’s attention to the fine line between fictional and historical representation and tells us that past is available to us only through traces and fragments.

Interestingly, the self-reflexive mode of the novel does not allow nostalgia to lapse into a glorification of a golden past, rather it complicates our understanding of missionary activity in the colonial era and how the conversion narrative has unfolded in the context of the Mala Aryan tribe. Aware that this has become a sensitive issue in the recent times, the narrator, unapologetically talks about how caste and class issue continue to dominate Christian churches, despite their claim of offering salvation from discriminatory practices. Curiously, the narrative about how evangelical Christianity reached the hill tribe and who was responsible for their

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Documentary as Pedagogical Tool: Witnessing Gender-based Violence in Leslee Udwin's *India's Daughter*

Mukul Chaturvedi

Abstract

This article focuses on how films and documentaries are an effective pedagogical tool to discuss the challenges of representing gender-based violence and its cognitive and affective impact on the audience. While documentaries are often used to create social awareness and act as platforms of advocacy, they offer valuable insights to discuss the ethical, aesthetic, and political challenges of representing violence because of their claim of representing reality faithfully. Focusing on Leslee Udwin's *India's Daughter* (2015), a BBC documentary based on the gruesome Nirbhaya rape in Delhi on 16 December, 2012, that shocked the country and invited unprecedented media coverage both nationally and internationally, this article examines how the film raises fraught questions about the transcultural and transnational rhetorical acts of witnessing gender-based violence through mediated global communication networks. The article also reflects on how issues like narrative voice, point of view, affect and multiple possibilities of interpretation that arise in documentary representation resonate with discussions in literature classrooms.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, transnational, affective, realism, witnessing, representation

Introduction

Just before its worldwide release on International Women's Day (8 March, 2015) on NDTV, a restraining order was issued against *India's Daughter*

Reclaiming Womanhood: Sexuality, Violence and Women with Disabilities

Mukul Chaturvedi

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of sexuality and violence and how they are inextricably linked in women with disabilities. Perceived by the family as well as the state to be vulnerable to sexual violence in terms of assault and rape, what remains under-examined in case of women with disabilities is the violence that is committed by not regarding them as sexual beings with desires for emotional and sexual fulfilment. By depriving them of roles that are available to able-bodied women and considering them as non-sexual beings, their humanity and dignity is compromised. Drawing from the field work with women with disabilities, the paper argues that despite family support, institutional rehabilitation and government initiatives, issues of sexuality, sexual identity, companionship, and reproductive rights of disabled women are often glossed over. The paper locates female experience of disability and sexuality in the larger context of feminist debates about the female body and argues that a rights-based approach will address the needs and aspirations of disabled women. Additionally, the paper also examines specific articles of United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (UNCRPD) that acknowledge the needs and aspirations of women with disabilities and their right to have a home and family.

Hesse, an Ambivalent Modernist: A Study of Siddhartha

Savita Kiran*

Abstract

This paper argues that Hermann Hesse can be classified as an "ambivalent modernist" due to his unique approach to the anxieties of modernity in his works. Unlike many modernist writers who focused solely on the psychological aspects of human experience, Hesse delved deeper into the realm of the soul. Drawing on the psychological theories of Carl Jung, particularly the concept of individuation, Hesse's novels explore the journeys of protagonists seeking self-discovery. This paper focuses on Siddhartha, analyzing how the protagonist embarks on a personal odyssey to understand his own existence.

Hesse's brand of modernism can be described as ambivalent. He acknowledges the anxieties and disillusionment of the modern world, exemplified by Siddhartha's dissatisfaction with his materialistic life. However, Hesse goes beyond the purely psychological concerns of many modernists. He incorporates Freudian ideas but transcends them by exploring the spiritual dimension through the concept of Jungian individuation. This is evident in Siddhartha's journey of self-discovery, which emphasizes internal struggles and experiences over external validation. Ultimately, Hesse's heroes, like Siddhartha, must undertake their own unique paths of individuation to achieve self-realization. This focus on the soul's journey and the importance of self-discovery distinguishes Hesse's ambivalent modernism from other modernist approaches.

Keywords: Hermann Hesse, Ambivalent Modernism, Siddhartha, Self-discovery, Spiritual Quest.

Early 20th-century literature mirrored the profound anxieties of the modern world. The psychological unease and spiritual emptiness stemmed from a confluence of factors, including the erosion of traditional faith. Scientific discoveries like Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and Charles Lyell's geological findings challenged the literal interpretations of the Bible's creation story (Lyell, 1830). Additionally, utilitarian ideas championed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill emphasized pleasure-seeking, which clashed with the established Christian values of suffering as a path to salvation (Bentham, 1789). Karl Marx's scathing critique of religion as the "opium of the masses" further fueled the questioning of established belief systems (Marx, 1844).

This societal shift is reflected in the literature of the era. T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" captures the modern man's anguish and alienation, yearning for connection in a fragmented world (Eliot, 1915). Similarly, W.B. Yeats, in poems like "The Second Coming," expresses a longing for a spiritual revival, albeit a more ambiguous one that acknowledges the decline of traditional religious structures (Yeats, 1921). Even novelists like Aldous Huxley, in works like "Brave New World," depict a dystopian future devoid of spiritual meaning, highlighting the disillusionment felt by his generation (Huxley, 1932).

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