



IN *The Republic*, Plato says : “Any ordinary city is in fact two cities, one the city of the poor, the other the city of the rich.” In India today, we all live that schizophrenic existence. Some of us study humanities and sciences under conditions so inhuman and unscientific that those who spend their lives cleaning the classrooms have to get us to read letters out to them or to write applications for them. Esaoulov’s novel is an exposure of this state of things toward which most of us have learned to desensitize ourselves. I found this book an enlightening experience. I was ashamed to find that by reading it I learnt much more about the physical and mental life of a whole group of university workers, than I had come to know through a decade of working on the campus.

The book is a simple account of the relationship between a Russian settled in India, and the woman who comes to sweep his house. The narrator, an ex lecturer in Delhi university begins his interest in the sweeper woman with a typical middle class desire to teach her to read and write, in the belief that books will clear her mind and reveal the “truth” to her. However, his sincere efforts to benefit her as an individual prove futile since she is so deeply embedded in her family and community that involvement with her problems inevitably draws him into a preoccupation with the predicament of the Bhangi community, particularly the women. He gets to know each member of her family, he visits her husband’s village.

As a Bhangi and a woman, she represents the most downtrodden, and this symbolic significance is underlined by the fact that she is nameless throughout the novel, but at no point is the symbol allowed to obscure the individual. It is the strength, dignity and potential of this individual which captures the imagination of the reader as of the narrator.

The narrator betrays a tendency to slip into blaming the oppressed for their condition. Why do they spend so much on marriages ? Why do they fatalistically accept their condition instead of rebelling against it ? he asks indignantly. He also tends to over idealize the life of the common people in contemporary Russia. It is not clear whether or not he is directing

BOOKS

End Of A Life

By A-V. Esaoulov

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irony at his own simplifications of this kind. However, that fidelity to fact which is so characteristic a feature of the Russian novelistic style has a way of clarifying these confusions. Each stray detail falls into place, building up a picture of the woman’s life—from her reproaching him for throwing away mouldy food instead of giving it to her, to her having been given lashes according to the caste custom, because she was not a submissive enough wife. Her beliefs, her world view, can no longer be viewed as simply eradicable by literacy, when one is shown how rooted they are in a historical experience of deprivation. When the narrator offers her food, for instance, she shows concern over his not eating enough, and says : “It is good to eat in the morning, then throughout the day one gets food.”

Added to this economic deprivation is the humiliation heaped on her as a woman. Thus when teaching her to write, the narrator has to combat both physical distortion caused by poverty and manual labour: “Her hand and fingers hardly obeyed her. She was 32 years old. From the age of five her hand had got accustomed to the heavy handle of the road broom; for her it was not easy to use a spoon or a table knife...”, and also mental damage: “She tried to justify herself by saying that during the five years she had spent in Itwari’s village as a young bride, she had grown dull because of the beatings, excessive work, and starvation. When she was a little girl, her memory had been as good as that of Maya and Ranjita.” All that being a Bhangi woman entails is faithfully recorded—carrying head-loads unaided by men, doing most of the work in the village, veiling the face before the father-in-law and even the son-in-law, being kicked and beaten as a matter of routine, and being exposed to disease and death through the callousness of the medical system, as when she and her family spend a whole year mistaking the swelling caused by a tumour for a pregnancy.

An often ignored dimension of the caste system which is sensitively depicted in the novel is the internalization of untouchability. Not only does the woman shrink from the touch of her employers, and insist on keeping her utensils in the filthiest places, not only is she unable to conceive of European doing their own sanitation work in their own countries, but she lives with a whole mythology rooted in the sordid reality of an ancestry who, “for generations, for centuries, have been hereditary

cleaners of excrement.” Thus she believes that an unfaithful wife will be punished by reincarnation as a *tatti* worm, and the fairy stories the children hear from their grandmother centre around humorous encounters with *tatti*. The narrator, who is a friend of the grandmother, and converses with her about “life, old age, children”, reflects: “For Mataji to speak about the *tatti* was as natural and habitual as for me to speak about poetry, science, music.”

However, the overall effect of the novel is by no means to show human beings subdued to the ugliness in which they are forced to live. A stronger effect is created by the development of the relationship between narrator and sweeper woman, past the barriers of his middle class prejudices, occasional pettiness and pomposity (depicted with engaging honesty), and her natural suspicions (at one point she fears his kindness may be a prelude to sexual molestation), and past the great barriers of class, caste, age, race, culture, language, to the point where she can confide in him the intimate details of her sickness, and also her innermost dreams and fantasies.

Another strength of the book is that though the narrator often gets exasperated with the woman’s fatalistic acceptance of injustice, at no point does she become a stereotype of the dumb oppressed woman. She is capable of surprising with her tenderness, her flaring temper, above all her insight, as when the narrator asks which of the heroes of the Mahabharata she would like to have married, and she replies: “None.” “But you said you liked them all”, he replies, expecting her to say that she could not have married any of them since they were not of her caste. Instead she answers: “The point is not whether I liked them or not. If my mother had not got me married when I was a child, I wouldn’t have married anybody once I had grown up... Would anybody of his own free will put a yoke on himself? Would he willingly go into slavery?... When Mataji sees the way he treats me, she weeps and says to him: ‘Had I known what was in store for her, I wouldn’t have taken her to the doctor when she was so ill in her childhood; it would have been much better for her to have died as a child than to live with you.’ Several times Mataji told him that if he continued to behave with me the way he did, she would give him money and make him give me back to her... No, had I been grown up, I would not have agreed to marry anybody...”

Such moments work to pervade the book with a sense of wasted human potential, the note on which the novel ends: “...a great sadness overcomes me, because I know that...my life-long dream of going back to my country is now as futile as her dream of being reborn into a big *zat*, and then of studying a lot...and driving a motorcycle with a helmet on her head.”

Though realizing that his naive attempts to improve her life have failed in the main, and that his own life is coming to an end in poverty and infirmity, the narrator is no longer the alienated, neurotic being he was at the beginning of the novel, because the woman and her family give him the warmth and human companionship he needs, and also because the relationship does for him what the novel does for the reader—enlarges the frontiers

of the imagination: “But then it begins to seem to me that I have always known her—that I always saw her, heard her, read about her, but that somehow she did not reach my consciousness...that looking at her I did not see her; that my upbringing and my habits, a lack of intelligence or compassion clouded my eyes...that I needed a long and useless life, a lonely and sad old age...in order to notice her, sense her and begin to love her...”

—Ruth Vanita

Books Received

Ursula Sharma, *Women, Work And Property In North West India*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1980

A valuable study based on fieldwork in two villages, shows how economic change has led to relatively little alteration in the relationships of power and dependence between men and women in rural households.

Bobby Siu, *Women Of China*, Zed Press, London, 1982, £5.95

Fills in the history of Chinese women’s participation in the struggle before 1949. Describes the range of their activism, urban and rural.

S. Krishnamurthy, *The Dowry Problem : a legal and social perspective*, IBH Prakashana, Bangalore, 1981, Rs25

Written by an ex police officer, presents the results of a survey of dowry deaths in Delhi, 1979, and examines the dowry law.

Hannah Papanek & Gail Minault ed., *Separate Worlds: studies of purdah in South Asia*, Chanakya Publications, Delhi, Rs 120

Collection of research papers by 10 American scholars, studies purdah as a social process, that is, a system of ideas and actions responsive to changing economic, political and cultural forces in society.

Angela Kilmartin, *Cystitis : the complete self help guide*, Warner Books USA, 1981, \$ 5.95

Offers simple, practical, medically approved advice to help you guard against and deal with attacks of urinary and vaginal problems which nearly every woman suffers at some time of her life. A valuable book, gives information in simple language, to help the reader understand the reasons for urinary and vaginal infections, cope with them and keep them from recurring.

Rhoda Lois Blumberg and Leela Dwaraki, *India’s Educated Women : options and constraints*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1980, Rs 60

Attempts to study the options available to educated Indian women. Combines the findings of a 1966-67 study of Bangalore women graduates and post graduates with new data obtained a decade later by going back and contacting one third of the same women to see what they were doing.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Indian Women’s Battle For Freedom*, Abhinav Publications Delhi, 1983, Rs 45

An active participant in the national movement recounts some of the major events in which women participated. □