



BOOK REVIEWS

Of Passing Interest

A Partial Woman

by Mina Singh

Review : Latika Padgaonkar

A *PARTIAL Woman* breeds an uneasy bewilderment in the reader. What is the novel actually telling you, you ask yourself. What is it in this story of an ordinary woman in an ordinary setting, unfulfilled in marriage, unfulfilled in romance, that makes it flounder at ground level, like a trapped bird beating its wings, unable to take flight?

The reasons for this unease are several, some of them serious, and they stem from several facets of the book. The novel is a tale of a young girl, Champa, living in a middle class family, one that is average in every sense of the word. While still in her teens, she is married off, not to a like-minded family, but one of equal mediocrity. The husband, to give the tale a different twist, has a hold on people suffering from all manner of physical and psychic ailments, and is a healer of sorts. The marriage is meaningless, no child is born to help Trilochan give [as she is now called] a direction to her life, a sense of womanhood. Her brief moments of vicarious joy lie in cuddling her brother's baby.

Trilochan moves to her parents' home where she is not particularly welcome, and thence to a cousin's under whose roof she has a 'relationship' with her brother-in-law. Thereafter, the story spins out of con-

trol, with a few un-memorable characters walking in and out of her world, till she finds herself, oddly enough, a refugee, and ends up teaching in a school.

I have no trouble with Mina Singh's story. What is amazing, however, is that the book remains encased in unengaging trivialities. Where, in these humdrum happenings, is a vision, a larger meaning that would have freed Trilochan from her cage? Why is her closeted life — mainly confined, and understandably enough — to the family, not lifted by new perceptions into the complex workings of the human mind, or of the society she knows or, for that matter, any other order beyond the psychological?

The beam of Mina Singh's pen has a clear focus: the little emotional storms that rage in the mind of her heroine. The storms are all the same, characterised by one stark sentiment: fear. "I shrank back...", "I stood bolt upright in fear...", "...left me dismayed", "I had been clawed to the ground. I struggled to escape as waves of revulsion rode on panic, choking me. I tried to scream but could not comprehend how to stop." "I turned numb with horror", "I was scandalised", "I was aghast" and suchlike phrases pervade not grow, neither within herself nor with help

from external forces. Nor, indeed, can she imaginatively transform reality, lift it above the purely descriptive. Fear haunts her till the day, by pure coincidence, she takes to teaching. Fear of doing and saying the wrong thing, fear of what will happen next, fear of violating the social code, fear of her conscience. Such character construction proves somewhat tiresome and, in the end, utterly joyless.

I have a grievance over the way Mina Singh has played with the point of view in her novel. *A Partial Woman* is an autobiography. And the choice of the first person narration is a delicate one, it comes with its own limitations. The substance of what is narrated must be wholly framed within the author's world. But at different points in the story, there is scope for the reader to question the source of the information he receives. How did Trilochan come to know this or that fact which she conveys to us? Did someone tell her? Or has the point of view simply shifted? Has the author herself assumed the mantle of the narrator? Consider this: "True, he drank every day and smoked and had a way with Tommies and their Anglo-Indian women, but he quarrelled with his wife in public if she dared to move out of the house without him and, on one occasion, had threatened to kill Pipa - or so Jung Bahadur had heard

from his wife. Jung Bahadur often found him in some room of their rambling house, cleaning his guns, talking with perfect understanding to his servant boy, Raju.” How does Trilochan know this? Who tells her? Or this: “Since Raja Sahib preferred practising on the harmonium in the company of a young entourage of complimenting musicians, in the good fun of making a frankly down-market sort of music with Muni’s boys, he remained disconcertingly innocent of the twinges of conscience felt by his wife when the displayed 18th century vina and nambiar violin reprimanded her for the musical and spiritual dereliction of her household.

I have a grievance with Singh’s style as well. Her use of language is over-excited and shrill, adverbs and adjectives jostle for space: “The gang with sharpened staves was menacingly restive - old Bagga’s defiance was a lacerating disappointment.” “The compulsory emptiness of her life as a girl was now perceptibly in blight.” “It was my first train ride and as the deafening roar and cranking wheels of the great train drowned out the voices in my head, the sudden eruption of exhilaration left me even more dismayed than before.” “Exposing a new-born baby to a murderous attack by disgruntled workers and then accusing the favourite aunt of casting an evil eye on the child.” Singh’s writing betrays a lack of control, of elegance; such devices (easy enough with a computer these days) are never a substitute for thought. The language outweighs what it describes, proves to be too big a bag for what it holds.

But its chief failings is its inability to stir an emotion in the reader. On the contrary, it leaves you exhausted and empty with no particular thrill in what happens next. What will be Trilochan’s fate? Will she be happy? Will she find love? It has ceased to matter. *A Partial Woman* remains a novel of no more than partial interest. □

Traditional Wisdom

Mother & Child Care in Traditional Medicine (Two Volumes)

Lok Swasthya Parampara Samvardhan Samithi, Madras

Review : Nutan Pandit

THESE two small volumes detail traditional Indian knowledge and practice with regard to labour and childbirth.

Book II describes the process of childbirth thus: “When the fetus descends further or is going to be expelled it leaves the cardiac region and descends to the lower abdomen, stays at the region of the neck of the bladder. The frequency and duration of labour pain increases.”

This kind of detailed and accurate description of birth is amazing since modern obstetrics, as we know it today, has its roots in the West. It started as late as the seventeenth century when men began to use forceps to extract babies. These men were not surgeons but barber surgeons.

“Until well into the twentieth century, no one knew when in the menstrual cycle conception occurred, where menstrual blood came from, how long an average pregnancy lasted or how to diagnose the condition of pregnancy (the birth of a baby was not unreasonably considered the only sure sign). Until the end of the nineteenth century, few women had the money or the inclination to seek medical supervision for their pregnancy. Those who did were likely to encounter the hazardous remedy of blood letting.” (See

for instance, *Pursuing the Birth Machine*, M. Wagner)

On the other hand traditional Indian knowledge divides the diagnosis of pregnancy into three:

- Presumptive signs and symptoms
- Probable signs
- Positive signs

There are words for placenta (apara), uterus (garbha), birth canal (prasava marga).

Book I, Pg. 19 states, “In the first three months of pregnancy the product of fertilization is in a fluid/jelly state and thus the woman should be given more liquids or fluids. Also, during these three months the major part of mass is formed — for this *madhura* and *sheetha veerya* substances should be given which help in the formation of the cellular mass and promote growth.” The details of the growth of the baby as described are today a proven scientific fact!

The accuracy of the knowledge expressed by the ancient *vaidyas* (doctors) like Chakra and Suchraih in the *Chakra Samhita* is startling. Apart from accuracy there is also a great amount of order and organisation in the material put forth.

Minor ailments of pregnancy are described as body/joint pain, dizziness, nausea and vomiting, oedema, night blindness, blurred

vision, piles, worms, constipation, diarrhoea, fever, jaundice, burning sensation during micturition, etc. For all these *vaidic* cures are known to be available.

Habitual abortion in the various months of pregnancy is also discussed, along with *ayurvedic* remedies for them. Disorders of the foetus are discussed and treatment suggested. For instance: "According to Sushrutha, due to the affliction of *vaayu*-, the fetus gets dried up, does not fill the mother's abdomen properly and quivers very slowly. The symptoms of this condition are as follows:

- The size of the foetus is small and under developed. (Today, medically referred to as I.U.G.R. or Intra-Uterine Growth Retardation).
- The quivering of the foetus is very mild.
- The foetal heart sounds are also very mild. One of the treatments suggested is :- "Anabolic drugs, milk and meat soup should be used."

Book II deals more with the time of labour and delivery, the role of the *dai* or traditional birth attendant. It speaks of descent of the foetus, placental retention, post-partal bleeding, labour, delivery, cutting of the cord. It also deals with complications during and after delivery. There is also a mention of cesarean section in *Sushrutha Samhita*. Postnatal care of mother and baby, breastfeeding, ailments the baby many suffer from are also discussed in Book II.

Put together, both books bear testimony to the richness of the Indian cultural, medical and scientific heritage; It is sad that this wisdom and knowledge is being ignored rather than scientifically evaluated, upgraded and disseminated to the Indian people. □

Salar Jang Museum in Hyderabad

*Silenced children
file through history's trinket halls,
bored by idols and jeweled scimitars.
Unmasked, their feet caressing marble,
they swallow time, vacuumed of thought.
An eyerimmed boy brews midnight moods
while sisterhood – serving
with poplar spine and willow tress –
greens into light,
not yet inlawed or asked:
Why should you have it better?
Command without guidance,
breathed down their necks,
provides what little propulsion
is needed to move along, choking a question
which teachers are not paid to answer.
Here's many unsung Shakuntala
queuing to gaze at a ruler's mace
and no one to crown her with jasmine.*

— Wolfgang Somary

For a Woman to Think Alone

*Woman
to be able to breathe in peace
invokes her solitude
touches her solitude
has a dialogue with it.*

*Lives,
drinks it without a word.
One day,
She doesn't say anything to her solitude
doesn't try at all to share her pain
just reflects.*

*No sooner than
she thinks
alone
before stumbling upon an answer
is she declared
dangerous.*

— Katyayani