

THE BOOK REVIEW

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A Kingdom for Women

Umesh Kumar

THE WOMAN WHO CLIMBED TREES: A NOVEL

By Smriti Ravindra

HarperCollins, 2023, pp. 422, ₹ 599.00

There is something that defines a literary debut. It not only gives an early intimation of the author's literary and social concerns but also her style. With a style that is raw and intimate, a concern that is deeply empathetic and felt, Smriti Ravindra—the Nepali Indian writer does enough to announce the uniqueness of her literary craft in *The Woman who Climbed Trees*. In fact, the book has had a long gestation period. According to Ravindra, she began to write the novel in 2007-08, which started to take concrete shape only during her stay in the United States. The spatio-temporal detachment, both from Nepal and India while in the US allowed the author to contemplate the relationship between Nepal and India rather deeply and critically. Consequently, the book is about people and their struggles, displacement and desire, loss and longing, and above all—a stunning chronicle of female (sexual) desire, her inner and outer life coupled with a deep-rooted desire for female friendship.

Set in Nepal and its borderlands before the arrival of the internet, the novel begins by describing the marriage of a fourteen-year-old Meena with Manmohan, a twenty-one-year-old Nepali boy she has never met. The narrative documents Meena's problematic marital journey and her diasporic life. After marriage, Manmohan spends most of his time in Kathmandu confining Meena to face the complexities of domestic life and a tyrannical mother-in-law. In an unfamiliar cultural setting, Meena is an outsider struggling to carve a position for herself in her husband's home. While experiencing intense longing and nostalgia for her childhood home, Meena attempts to find love and comfort in the company of her sister-in-law, Kumud. But eventually, Meena feels betrayed as Kumud is unable to reciprocate her sexual advances. Meena's unrequited love for Kumud has a deep psychological impact and adds a distinct layer of complexity to her character.

As one moves on, the narrative, in a language that is subtle and piercing, questions the suppressive influence of the institution of marriage in (South Asian) communities and the resultant celebration of heteronormativity. Readers will witness long spells of marital dryness even though Meena and Manmohan start a family. The author deftly delineates the spectrum of emotions that Meena undergoes after starting her family. Meena's love for her children continues to grow and so is her resentment for

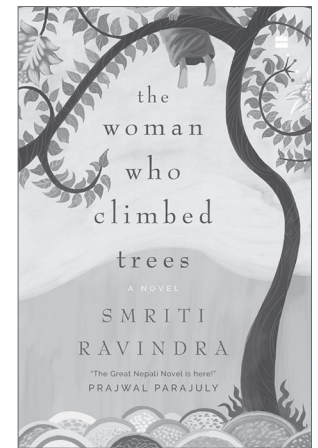
Manmohan. The resentment adds to her increasing loneliness. Meena's attempt to address this loneliness by fantasizing about Bollywood stars becomes a refuge to run away from the harsh realities of life. However, the attempt proves to be a short-term measure as Meena's mental health starts to decline gradually. This is an important moment in the

novel. At this point, the text turns inwards and seeks to probe the issue of the psychotic break that derails Meena's life, and by extension—the lives of women in general. The episode of Meena's mental breakdown is different from other such portrayals elsewhere for here the character is not consumed by the event of mental imbalance.

On the contrary, Meena's madness makes her oscillate between imprisonment and liberation. Under the guise of insanity, she could provide a vent to her repressed desires and emotions, without being worried about the hypocrisy of civility. At the same time, it won't be much of an effort for the readers to realize that Meena's insanity is not genetic but environmental. The structural and strategic environment of patriarchal control is such that it pushes healthy, beautiful, and headstrong women like Meena into the drain of insanity.

The social and political division of Nepali society into Pahadis (people from the hill area) and Madhesi (from the plains) and the historical conflict is yet another concern felt throughout the novel. The text in hand gives voice to the Madhesi life world. The Madhesi are often at the receiving end due to their engagement in low-skilled menial jobs, poverty, and limited access to education. Readers might be familiar with the Pahadi-Madhesi conflict, but Ravindra makes it real by weaving the same into the lives of her characters. One can cite the example of Manmohan—Meena's husband. Plagued by meekness, cowardice, and a constant fear of being called out, Manmohan—the Madhesi, is a perennial outsider. His humiliation serves as a reminder of the long-standing conflict and resentment between the two communities. However, credit must be given to Ravindra for not overplaying this conflict. The writer is quick to point out that though Manmohan is a frightened man outside, he is a bully inside his own house while dealing with his wife and children. In other words, the behaviour of the character undergoes a spin depending upon the space he is occupying at a particular time.

In the same vein, a careful reading will affirm that Ravindra is heavily occupied with the narrative function of space in the novel. Though not exhaustive, readers will encounter the following prominent narrative spaces



in the novel: Nepal and India; Pahadi and Madesi; domestic and public; mental and physical; heterosexual and non-heterosexual; myth and reality, among others. Needless to say, every narrative space appears with its own distinct politics and social baggage. However, within this premise of the narrative function of space, the positionality of women remains the focal point of attention. And in case this positionality demands a reimagination, Ravindra is ready to walk an extra mile. The author's inclusion of Prologue and Epilogue in effect fences the boundaries of the narrative function of space and saves the novel from going into chaos. Speaking differently, if the Prologue succeeds in constructing a violent masculine space, showcasing the patriarchal reign, the Epilogue makes serious inroads in deconstructing these patriarchal and masculine designs, making the reader wander between the real and the utopian, between patriarchal and feminist—creating thereby a deliberate and distorted analogy. Though one will be at the risk of providing spoilers, readers will discover how the Epilogue abandons the requirement of a mandatory groom in a marriage plot, looming over of the dislocated personae and the complete disregard for gender employment, etc. Employing a utopian streak, Ravindra imagines a kingdom for women, albeit over the top of the peepal trees. Hence, *The Woman who Climbed Trees* also climbs out of the vicious circle of subjugation. The trees are symbols of alternative spaces for women and pinpoint, yet again, that the escape is always nature. But what do these spaces do? Well, the spaces not only question the anti-women stance of South Asian society but also call out the absence of women in discourse and in history.

The Woman who Climbed Trees is a unique and earthy feat in storytelling. It is an organic mix of myths, songs, and narratives—advancing a ringside, in-depth psychological portrayal of its characters, particularly that of women. The features just mentioned give a very local character to the novel. But this also means that the text decides to give no concession to the western readers. A daring stance for the Indian English novel! However, this is not entirely new as scholars have been arguing regarding the newly emerging trend in Indian English novels where they are turning 'more local' (Thomas, 2024). Having said that, the novel can be clubbed in the iconic category of texts such as *Sultana's Dream* (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1905), *Herland* (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1915) and *The Inner Courtyard* (Ed. Lakshmi Holmstrom, 1991).

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Life and the Living of it

Malati Mathur

WEDNESDAY'S CHILD

By Yiyun Li

Fourth Estate Harper Collins, pp. 256, ₹ 599.00

Words do not always just tell a story, even when they may appear to. They may, at times, not tell a story at all but offer reflections on life—and death, form concrete shapes of abstractions, dismantle beliefs and long-held certainties and cause one to doubt one's very existence—why, the very idea of this universe itself. And in doing so, they tell stories...

Yiyun Li's stories carry this often ephemeral, often substantially realistic quality within them; they wrap up the characters and their lives in the mists of introspection and recollection as well as the light of realization in moments of utter clarity; events and their aftermath cloud and illuminate by turns, the lives and perspectives of the people in the stories and those around them. That life is not a series of grand and dramatic incidents is brought out starkly in these stories where even the dramatic and the catastrophic can recede into the background of a life that is just led, or dare one say, a life that leads itself of its own volition or so it sometimes seems.

Marital lives, relationships, friendships, loss, alienation, aging, loneliness, mourning, the urge to reach out and touch for a few evanescent moments the life of another, chance meetings that lend significance to those moments and leave memories that can be both sweet and bitter, are the stuff that her stories are made of. Quiet desperation and yet the will to go on is the leitmotif in many of the stories, as are death and memory. The prose curves through human emotions—so personal to the characters and yet so universal—recounting and recalling quietly but tellingly, of the shallowness of our views and the labyrinthine depths of our feelings all twined so intricately together that it is well-nigh impossible to separate those strands and see where reason stops and the heart takes over and vice versa.

Li's characters live seemingly 'normal' lives, or at least strive to do so till it no longer remains sustainable and the fissures appear, often too deep to be plastered or glossed over, leading to the inevitable fracturing and breaking away of people and relationships. The opposites coalesce seamlessly and effortlessly—life and death; exile and assimilation; love and loss; laughter and grief; music and cacophony; kindness and cruelty; caring and forgetting.