

Strings attached to puppet friends

Indian writers in English have come into their own quite rapidly. Every year one hears of mind boggling advances and international book launches for Indians. These authors, based in India and abroad, regularly feature in the long list and short list of book awards. However, there have been far fewer books on South India compared to books, both fiction and non-fiction, emerging from the North West and the East!

Arundhati Roy broke that mould with her path breaking *God of Small Things*, a novel which captured Kerala in all its beauty and complexities. One always wondered why no talented writer came up with a novel based in Tamil Nadu. Anu Jayanth, in her debut novel, *Finger Puppet* fills that gap with great élan.

Jayanth's novel looks at a wealthy brahman ("not brahmin, its brahman" says the author firmly) family in Tiruchirappalli, a town known for its temples. Jayanth who grew up in Madras in the Sixties, captures the ambience of a Tamil Brahman household with its schizophrenic tendencies with great competence. One can

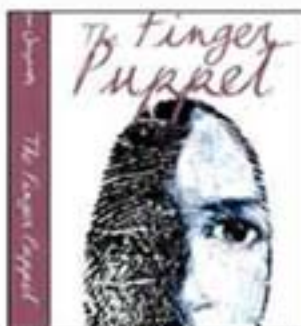
almost smell the jasmines and hear the bells ring in the *puja* room. Also the English spoken in BBC accent.

Tara, the protagonist who has a speech impediment, grows up with her two sisters, in what seems like a well off brahman family of the sixties. India is still newly independent. It hasn't opened its doors to globalisation. A newly emerging country is trying to cope with the many divisive forces which can tear it apart. Like the caste system. The Tamil brahmans are caught up in the other castes asserting themselves in the Tamilnadu of the decade. Education, which they have always seen as their prerogative, is being demanded by others too. They find themselves unseated from the various pinnacles they have put themselves in.

Finger Puppet is the alter ego of Tara who paints a face on her thumb and calls it Yatri in consultation with her beautiful elder sister Padmini and her second sister, the very bright and sharply witty Cordelia. It is quite natural for children being given Shakespearean names in English literature-loving Brahman families. On the



THE PUPPETEER: Author Anu Jayanth



The Finger Puppet

By Anu Jayanth

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surface it is a typical upper class Tam Brahman family. Traditional upbringing at home and convent education outside.

However, nothing is as it seems. Their mother is a child widow who eloped with their father who actually came to see her younger sister. Father Ramakrishnan who was educated in England is a man full of complexes, possessive to the extreme, and given to violent tempers. The mother and daughters are emotionally and physically abused with great regularity. An elder brother has been kicked out of the house by the father in a fit of rage. The eldest, Padmini, who is as beautiful as her name, cannot cope and tries to kill herself several times.

Tara retreats into her inner life with her only companion, the finger puppet. Not as attractive as her older sisters when she is very young and hampered by her speech problems, she does not have friends other than her family. Their father does not allow classmates to be brought home and when they are smuggled in, they get locked up in cupboards to escape their father's wrath.

In this strange family, there is a lot of music and

arts thanks to their mother and the father who deals in antiques. They are allowed go out and learn music and give concerts under his tight supervision. Into their lives enters an extraordinary young man, Ved Prakash, with whom Tara promptly falls in love although she is still a child who hasn't even reached her teens.

While the story of the Ramakrishnans unfolds, we are also given a glimpse into the Vedas, mythology and religion. A recurring question is why Lord Krishna shows he is God through his mouth (when he reveals the universe to his foster mother Yashodhara by opening his mouth). Jayanth finds the answers in the Upanishads, Vedas and our myths

This is an extremely well written novel from the first time author. Even if one is not from the milieu she describes, there is enough drama and tension to keep the reader going.

However, the second half attempts to do too many things, tying up too many loose ends. If Jayanth hadn't tried to include all the thoughts racing in her fertile mind, the novel would have been really gripping.