

The Games that Toys Play

Title: The Finger Puppet
Author: Anu Jayanth
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This is a commendable debut novel by Houston-based Anu Jayanth. Mercifully, it is not about the angst of yet another meandering citizen of the great Indian diaspora that is becoming quite a factory of literary output in itself.

The Finger Puppet is a fine novel of revisiting a homestead of the 1960s in the town of Tiruchirapalli, in Tamil Nadu. Its protagonist is a 13-year-old girl with a speech impediment and her struggle within to combat her disability. She creates a little alter ego, her finger puppet. It is a pretend-plaything, literally a toy of our flesh, that most grandmothers taught us in childhood-of drawing a little face on the inside of the thumb and making conversation with it.

Thus Tara, the novel's main character, fashions an alter ego- Yatri, her finger puppet. Despite her silent and intense world that her words cannot give sound to, the girl manufactures in her mind and heart a persona who mimics the passions of the inhabitants of the real world-bloody, wrathful, vengeful, loving, dreaming, nurturing and hopeful. Her finger puppet has a life of its own and at times it becomes difficult to know when the two, radically different characters, rub off each other's qualities. Her finger puppet observes unflinchingly the real world of ugliness where fragility is crushed in the normal brutality of the day and the struggle for the disengaged to find a vocabulary of their own.

Jayanth paints a vivid picture of the early decades of post-Independent India and Tamil Nadu through the little home of the Ramakrishnans in Tiruchi. It is a family of little women, the talented elder sister, the feisty and acerbic middle sister, and the youngest- incoherent and wounded, led by the loving and long suffering mother. The group is lorded over by the father, a brutal male Anglophile patriarch, who has pretensions of modernity.

Jayanth is ruthless in stripping the respectability and the elitism of upper class Brahmins who were held in social reverence in those times. Modern winds are blowing in the 1960s in the form of social justice politics, anti- Brahminical rhetoric takes root in political space, traditions are upheld, yet their validity is challenged and the balance between history and modernity, spirituality and religiosity, subjugation of women and their independence all come for discussion within the novel.

The novel remains gripping in taking the tale forward of the four women, the ghosts and demons they battle in their hearts, their attempts at redemption, the curse of circumstances and the strength of their spirits. It also reflects the homespun charms of the Tamil Brahmin way of rituals and habits, its devotion to religion and classical arts, the burden of tradition and also the quirks of cleanliness and revulsion. Tiruchi, the silent town on the banks of the River Kaveri remains a little mute and is painted in broad strokes as a backdrop to the story. The book ends with a hope of deliverance and promise of better lives for the trio of sisters-not bound by sorority but by coexisting despite their individuality and charting their own lives.

The only grouse against the book are the long elaborate passages on the ancient texts, the Vedas, Hindu mythologies and the metaphors and meanings contained in them. As is the importance on passages to highlight the importance of sound and its physical embodiments in utterances that form the core of Brahminical knowledge and learning to highlight the struggle for speech and sounds that Tara battles. It gets a bit tedious.

In these days of marketing blitz and celebrity endorsements, you can't help but chuckle at the hint that the author is sitar maestro Ravi Shanker's sister-in-law. The playful references to his wife, as the sister with a girlhood crush on the sitarist, lighten up the grave tone of the story. The cover illustration by the author herself indicates the repertoire of talent she can reveal in many more stories to come.

An engaging read.

-- *Sudha G Tilak*