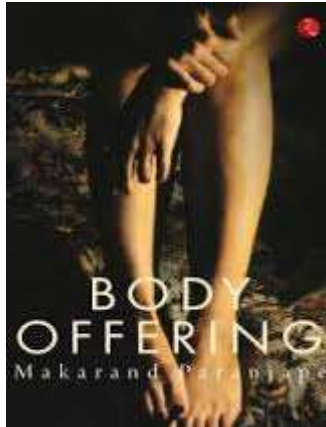


Conservative mindsets blocks acceptance of erotic literature in male-dominated India- a writer talks

By Madhusree Chatterjee, New Delhi

India-Books/Culture



Erotica, the narrative inspired by the “sensual and the intimate” between a man and woman is still light years away from evolving into a separate oeuvre of literature in India rooted in the land’s cultural contexts — even a millennia after the astute Brahmin Vatsyayan (residing in the early Hindu period of the Guptas) gave the Kamasutra- the manual of love - to the world.

Writers, critics, thinkers and readers blame the near absence of the Indian contemporary erotic literature to the social stereotypes that condition the outlook of readers. The primary among them is conservatism followed by conflicting value systems, religions and the way Indian literature has evolved over the decades to mirror reality rather than the “lyrical and the romantic”.

The bulk of the literature penned and published in India fail rise out of the rut of smut – and hence trashed by serious readers. Erotic pursuits even in the realm of literature have been treated as taboo in the “relatively repressed” Indian contemporary society where latent amorous desire takes on macabre colours like rape and gender abuse.

In this turbulent milieu of growing gender crimes, addressing sexuality, passionate love and amorous relationship through the arts become

pertinent – at least even to raise awareness about sexual love among lay readers and common people by lifting it out of the mundane into the aesthetic.

The fact that a woman has right to her sexual choices does not always rest well with the patriarchal set-ups.

Patriarchal social structures in India is millennia-old — strengthened by the diverse faiths and cultures alike, barring a few pockets in South and northeastern India. In this context, “it will take 15-20 years for the average Indian readers to accept erotica in a healthy way”, says professor and writer Makarand R. Paranjape, who teaches English at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

Passion is a refined art that tunes the finer threads of life to respond with sanity to the complex emotional situations that interaction between the sexes present. Critics and intellectuals are of the view that the erotic muse should combine with other art forms - like visual, performance and literary- to create impeccable expressions of delicate creativity that hosts the human being – and its psyche – as the anchor. Erotica is about us – the daily anatomy of our loves and their nuances.

“Writing a good erotica is very difficult. I can think of only one writer- Anais Nin, the American writer and thinker- who has done justice to the erotic genre. It is hard to write an erotic sentence – a writer must be careful that it should not fall flat and at the same should sound smutty. The prose should have the right modulation,” Paranjape says.

Paranjape, a poet and prolific writer, has become a psycho-erotic storyteller in his second book, “Body Offering (the first being “Used

Books”) which weaves a passionate tale between a 45-year-old balding surgeon and a 25-year-old books editor in a publishing house. The story is one of unusual contrasts and subtleties — crossing over of cultures with a doctor from Marathawad (like the writer) courting a young Bengali 20-something from Kolkata into a steamy relationship that does not have a fairytale ending. It trails off in ambiguity. The narrative touches on deeper aspects of caste, creed, politics, acceptance that acts as a sub-plot to the main narrative.

Ashok, the doctor is partially a Dalit by birth while the girl, Sunayana, is on a higher rung in the social hierarchy. The language sets it apart from the stock IndoAnglian love stories — Paranjape consciously uses Indian vernacular English peppered liberally with Marathi and Bengali and references to classical Indian linguistic cultures.

The writer draws from modern tools of communication – long telephone conversations, SMS and epistolary introspections as literary devices. The narrative sometime meanders with peripheral characters – but the sexual interfaces are almost graphic in details.

“I don’t believe it is an erotic book. It is influenced by the idea of eros – undoubtedly. Eros in love and eros in truth are deeply connected. Truth is not harsh, but beautiful. If truth were not erotic, we would not pursue it. I was trying to explore the dialectical interaction between passion and piety,” Paranjape told this writer at a reading session at the India International Centre in New Delhi.

Paranjape defends his book on the premise that a “woman has a right to her libido (sex between a man and woman in love is always

consensual) . “In India, we are currently going through a sexual revolution – (freedom of sexual choices) whose aftermath may be unacceptable to many sections of the society,” the author observed.

“Deep down, we are a culture that represents freedom- even sexual freedom that is uninterrupted by the notions of dharma. Sunayana, the young heroine of the book is not a brazen woman. She is seeking something that is a reality,” Paranjape explains. The writer points out that “the 25-year-old has entered the relationship to learn something. It is a lesson- to grow as an emotional being.

“We have to start to register and review the truth about our social situations. Women should not be put into the category of virgin-whores as Sigmund Freud had categorized. They are people, who have their own explorations and quests. It will take a while for people to write about women with rich characters,” he said.

The novel is a comment on chemistry between ages as well – the divide between generations and the bridging effect of love. “This is the way life works. These days aging is happening in many ways. You are going to see strange couplings like these (in my book) even more,” Paranjape predicted, looking into the “romances “ of the changing India, fast shedding inhibitions.

The rules of love in the nation of 1.2 billion with nearly 65 per cent of its population below the age of 35 is quite different – not always “Fifty Shades of Grey”.

Body Offering by Makarand R. Paranjape has been published by Rupa & Co. Priced at Rs 295.