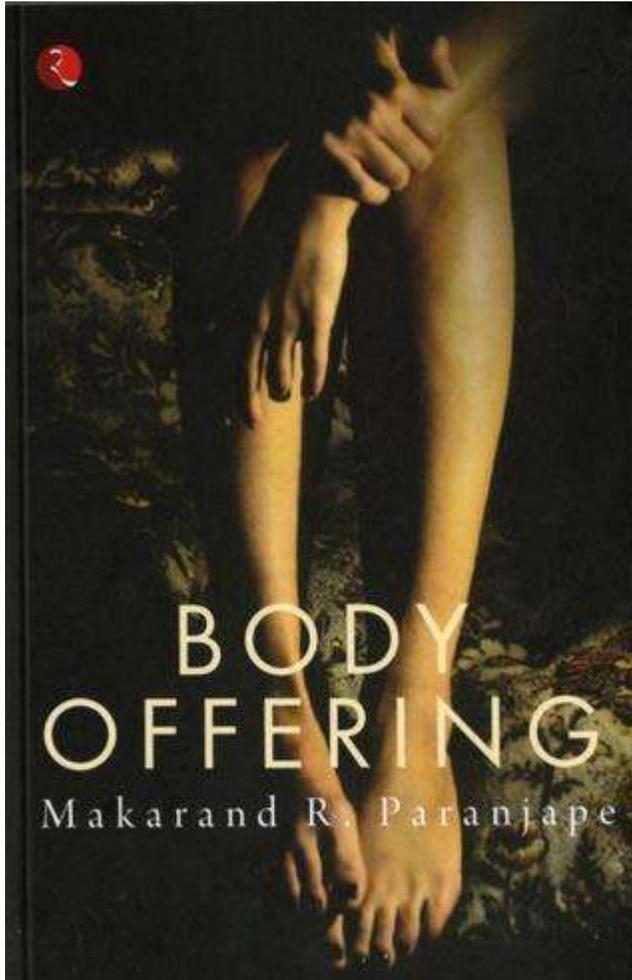


Emotional footsie

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SHASHI BALIGA



An engaging courtship, with an underwhelming ending.

The universal grouse that women nurse against men is that they don't 'talk'. That is one failing Dr. Ashok Sube — tubby, middle-aged, sometimes distant, often confused — could not be accused of. Even his girlfriend, the fragile, sharp Sunayana, who has constant problems with her Doctor's dissatisfactory behaviour, can't fault him on this count. Especially since she can match him word for extra word. They make for an exceptionally voluble, even verbose couple. "Talking is so important, so erotic, in fact," emphasises Ashok.

The analytical doctor is given to philosophical musings as well, even at the peak of his desire during lovemaking. You can see why this couple might have problems, given that both are prone to distracting thoughts at key moments.

Sunayana (Nayan for short), is a publishing executive, young, single and affluent, who is tremulously unsure of what she has going with Ashok, who's much older at 45, bitterly separated from his wife and daughter, and in no mood or position for commitment. What they have in common are emotional scars: Nayan sports multiple slashes on her wrist; Ashok is tormented about the manner in which his wife Kasturi walked out on him.

They play complicated emotional footsie with each other, both wary of the total surrender that love demands. Should they or shouldn't they? Both are wracked by that eternal question: Is it lust or love? Is it just the sex that holds them together? In their elaborate manoeuvring and thrust-and-parry lie the novel's most engaging portions. There are moments of clarity, but then, the air thickens and the mind clouds over. We're hooked to their story: how do they find their answers?

Paranjape tells his tale with solidly grounded details that anchor the frequent and long analytical bouts. Like so many best-selling American authors in the relationships segment, the author is sometimes guilty of over-analysis when he could let his characters' emotions take their own course.

For instance, a par-for-the-course discussion early on in the book draws in philosophers Robert Pirsig and Roland Barthes, Tao's gender construct, "(James) Joyce's epiphany", "(Marcel) Proust's illumination" and, unexpectedly, Jim Morrison of *The Doors*. I was interested enough to stay with the debates but I'm not sure how many readers would. Indeed, Nayan herself sighs on p 215: "It was exhausting, this analysis."

Not surprisingly, it is Nayan — petulant, complicated and needy and more real — who strikes the deeper chord. Her dilemmas are those of many well educated, highincome, urban Indian women desperately seeking love but rarely finding their version of it in relationships that never seem to mirror or fulfill their expectations.