

Of love & longing

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Makarand R Paranjape's 'Body Offering' deals with the complexities of physical relationships outside the institution of marriage, writes Monideepa Sahu.

This novel explores the deeper and broader implications of love through the unconventional relationship between a young, single woman, and a middle-aged surgeon struggling to accept the fact that his wife has their taken their child and abandoned him. What drives Sunayana and Ashok to offer their bodies to each other?

Their physical urges are mingled with the desire for love, understanding and acceptance. They are also swept into currents of fear; the fear of giving too much, of becoming dependent, and of being controlled by their own passions or by another's will. "It's amazing, awful," Sunayana tells Ashok, as she describes a raging sandstorm, which reflects their turbulent relationship. "(It's) like the dance of death. Do you know we have a phrase in Bangla, kal boishaki, and Tagore used the word hahakar, the turmoil of devastation, as that of an anguished heart, of spring — the terror of spring, you might say..."

Ashok is tormented by memories of his dear child and wife. He is afraid to commit completely to Sunayana since he is still technically married. His love for Sunayana shines through, when he tells her, "I feel as if I've put my life on hold for you... I seem to be trailing you, following you, checking up on you, just to see if you are fine. Nothing is easy, and in the end, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing."

Yet Ashok also realises that, 'When they were not having sex or arguing, they had nothing else to do. The emotional tie, so necessary for any good relationship, was missing. Instead, they seemed to be so different, unable to understand what the other meant, having instead to go through prolonged and often painful conversations to figure it out.'

Ashok stumbles on, helplessly driven by his truth-urge. He has a tendency to explain himself at logical length in order to avoid misunderstandings, to set boundaries that protect her and also safeguard himself. Ironically, this also keeps him emotionally apart from Sunayana, from not surrendering completely to love.

Sunayana too has her past as a lonely, if privileged, only child. She sports scars on her wrist to commemorate each past lover who made her dreams crash around her. 'Perhaps her monster would only disappear when someone loved her unconditionally... She saw her own desperate efforts to live up to what she thought were his expectations, but were actually her own projections, her abnormal neediness, her great yearning, her throbbing desire, all of these adding up to the true transformation of her being from a state in which she was fragmented, scattered, incomplete, insecure, inadequate, to being complete — full, full of shining hope and love, full of joy and luminousness.'

The author is largely successful in portraying Ashok and Sunayana as convincing, 'real' individuals with endearing traits and human failings. However, Sunayana, the emotional, intuitive, artistically inclined and vulnerable young woman and Ashok, the logical, professional, analytical older man who maintains a stiff upper lip, do not quite break free from conventional stereotypical moulds.

There are some strong introspective passages, such as where Ashok is likened to the author of a failed play, who comes on stage alone, in the spotlight, when the spectators and actors have all departed in disappointment. Like the failed author, Ashok achieves moments of revelation and understanding on his own, but only when his lover has left disappointed, realising that she no longer mattered, that it had been about him and his quest all along. At other points, such as when Sunayana visits her home in Kolkata to face spending Sunday evening alone, the author shows with masterly understatement her alienation from her parents, and her need for Ashok.

The writing style is uneven. There are lovely descriptive passages such as an account of a summer sandstorm as a reflection of their stormy relationship. A secret private balcony in Ashok's chamber in the medical institute becomes a vivid metaphor for their surprising voyage of emotional discovery. This contrasts with other passages cluttered with irrelevant details. For example, Ashok meditates, focusing on 'the nose, the face, the eyes, mouth, cheeks, ears, down the neck, the Adam's apple, down to the base...' details which drone on for several paragraphs. Passages such as the following not only add nothing to the narrative, but also end up being annoying or even ludicrous: 'His penis looked like a shrivelled banana, with the foreskin hanging down. As he scrubbed his testicles with the loofah, it began to revive even as he watched...'

"Talking is so important, so erotic, in fact," Ashok tells Sunayana. "As long as we want to talk to each other, there is hope, there is faith, there is desire." But at times Ashok's prolonged analysis of their relationship through dialogues can seem painfully contrived and boring. We can empathise with Sunayana when, 'she had lost him, but he persisted'. Overall, this contemporary urban Indian love story succeeds in entertaining while provoking thought. The characters and their inner struggles and dilemmas hold our attention until the surprising ending.