



Book Review: *When Jaya met Jaggu*

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When Jaya met Jaggu and Other Stories

Annapurna Sharma; 184 pages; Paperback

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Stories about love, grief, joy, and finding one's distilled emotions unanchored.

Annapurna Sharma is a professional nutritionist with a penchant for writing. Her first collection of poems, *Melodic Melange*, won the 2019 Pulitzer Books Award for Excellence. Focussed on myriad shades of love and human experiences her most recent collection of short stories *When Jaya met Jaggu and Other Stories* is a captivating, sensitive anthology about grief, joy, displacement, loss and unanchored distilled emotions. The anthology graphs a map of human encounters and experiences. It examines emotional ramifications, social reciprocity, and everyday lives in its pages.



While the stories are widely varied, a single motif runs through them, uniting them all: love. The blurb tells the readers:

Love is complex. It demands sacrifice and vows to fill our hearts but at the cost of something as dear as love. Love is inarticulate, liberating, hurting, healing – its an ordeal to be trapped in love. Yet these stories are strung by the one thread called love. The characters imbue love at various levels. They are quirky, filled with a sense of alienation, but at the same time packed with attachment and different shades of love.

A collection of nine stories, one could say that some stories have the richness and breadth of a novel. Most of the stories are set in small towns and revolve around themes like rural-urban continuum, class conflicts, Alzheimer's disease, forgetting/remembering, man/nature, etc. It's rare to read stories like these nowadays when writers are too conscious of literary theories and churn out loaded, theoretically grounded stories.

The anthology opens with 'Jasmine Maid' which is a poignant tale of a domestic worker and her daughter, Malli. It is a very sensitive and touching take on gender vis a vis class conflict. Malli works as a domestic help in a house where her mother worked. "And when her mother fell sick, she took over the job like it was a sarkari naukari" (13). There is a suggestion of the inevitability and predictability of a low-class girl child stepping into her mother's shoes. With faith in divine blessings, Malli prays to Lord Krishna. As she learns to "measure the distance between" the classes, she soon realises that Gods are powerless. With no fatherly figure, and an ineffective mother, she is a metaphorical orphan. The story lays bare the vast bridge between the haves and the have-nots. Like the jasmine flower, she loses her *namee* (moisture) day in and day out, waiting to wither away soon. The flower becomes a symbol of her innocence and purity soon to be trampled by the darkness of upper-class oppression and indifference inflicted on her.

The book is strewn with food imagery and culinary metaphors which continues in "Coffee Pleasure". Written in an epistolary form which is highly suitable to deal with the unsaid emotions and angst of a daughter. There's no plot as such in the story. The narrator Revathi is a 32-year-old woman. Her letters written to her mother unravels her notion of freedom, expressions, suppression and suppressed affection. Her notion of freedom is different from her mother's. For her sipping coffee becomes a ritual of independence. The soothing drink calms her agitated mind. Coffee also becomes a way of remembering her forgetting her mother. She says, "I have to learn the art of living. Living without you" (37). As the reason for her constrained relationship with her



mother is laid bare, the narrative becomes gripping. There is a clear desire on her part to correct her mother, “I think I am old enough to tell you your wrongs from rights” (42). She castigates her mother and seeks appreciation for her freedom. For her, the “maple” tree becomes a symbol of adaptability as she wishes her mother to be like it.

I particularly love the Sugar Maple. It spreads itself lavishly. Will you believe if I tell you that its leaves change colors from green to dark green to yellow to orange to red? Adapting to the seasons. Isn't that extravagant! It never loses its spirit, despite the change. I feel one with its soul (46).

The interplay of east/west continues as paradoxically she attains her freedom away from home and “middle class values” (47).

Similarly, in the surrealist story ‘Lunchtime’, Sony’s mental status is depicted in tandem with food imagery. Spurned by a lover, she uses food as a distraction to sustain her feelings. She indulges in emotional eating, “She gobbled the food, stuffing as much as she could. She had no time to ponder on taste or smell or looks. . .Sony looked down at her belly swollen with the scraps” (107).

The book is strewn with Hindi words. I wish there were annotations for the ease of non-native readers. But, never mind the annotation. The anthology is a wonderfully emotional read. The stories are delightfully descriptive whether unravelling a character or situation. One can seamlessly visualise the aroma, fragrance, colour, and taste of the things described. Despite the similitude in premise, each story brings forth something distinctive to the narrative that delves into the various shades of love and emotions. Annapurna’s stories explore various situations where the characters are faced with overwhelming challenges. Each character responds differently to the situations they find themselves in while exhibiting their own characteristics. There’s no idealistic escapism in Annapurna world. The reality of things will jolt the readers out of their inertia, which is simultaneously the strength as well as a disguised weakness of her work.