

Book Review

Coils of the Serpent (A Novel). Srivastava, Ramesh K., New Delhi: Authorspress, 2011. Pp. 310. Rs. 350/- (Paperback), ISBN-978-81-7273-559-3.

Book Review: **Usha Bande**, Wexlow, Lower Kaithu, Shimla (H.P.) 171003

Ramesh K. Srivastava is no stranger to creative writing. Author of five short story collections and a novel *Neema*, Srivastava has traced various aspects of human life—love, lust, suffering, revenge, terrorism, fear and social exigencies that make living both a pleasure and a problem. *Coils of the Serpent*, the novel under review, comes almost twenty-five years after his *Neema* (1986) and shows remarkable change in his style; he seems to have gained in technique and depth. The vibrant presence of the serpent, the name Nagina akin to 'Nagin' (female serpent) and the haunting thought of revenge make the story many layered and the novel becomes a tale of suspense. The action and the denouement are slow yet relatively quick. When finally Najama comes back home and “coiling” her arms around her mother tells her the story of her success in avenging her sister Shabana, we are left to wonder whether her steps were right or wrong. Dexterously, the author assures the readers—as her mother Haseena assures Najama—that it is the intention that matters, not the outcome. Do we hear the philosophy of the *Bhagwat Gita* in this justification?

Simply put, *Coils of the Serpent* is a story of vengeance—meticulously planned and deftly executed. It is a woman's single-handed fight for justice. Since justice does not and in many cases, cannot come through the mechanism of law, Najama plans it through her own resources and may be through some supernatural aid coming from her dead sister whose heart ached to “teach a lesson” to those who destroyed her. There are two forces that have spelled ruin on Shabana—the craving to possess her signified by the Nawab Hashmi and the lust to grab her money as implied by Munsoor Alam's greed. But in the bargain, an innocent and well-meaning man suffers for an act he does for bravado years ago in his youth. The man is Chandan Mohan who is branded a villain by some spiteful villagers and by Shabana's family.

In his earlier novel *Neema*, Prof. Srivastava has delineated a woman's suffering which he takes up here too but with a difference. His art has acquired more rhythm and his plot is painstakingly thought out. In the struggle for justice and in her self-confidence Najama/Nagina shows the march of the Indian woman from patriarchal clutches to independent judgement. The author paints Najama with powerful strokes. But a discerning reader cannot miss the tenderness with which Srivastava depicts Chandan Mohan's wife Dularia. He understands the traditional rural woman better: loving and sympathetic, weak yet strong and

innocent yet not blind to the ways of the world. It is in depictions such as these that Srivastava excels. We may appreciate Najama/Nagina for her grit but we love Chandan Mohan's wife for her naivety. The story is set in a small village called Danpur but soon it shifts to a nearby town Nanitpur. The descriptions of the village, village life, the innocence and intrigues, petty jealousies coupled with human goodness have come out alive with the use of appropriate language. Here is a man Chandan Mohan, a simple villager and Nawab Hashmi, a fading aristocrat around whom the novel revolves. Chandan Mohan's personality cult or may be his overwhelming gratitude for his benefactor sets the stage for his ruin. Together they make an interesting duo, most unlikely companions, somehow brought together by fate. Nawab Hashmi's imperious temper and autocratic behaviour ruins the family of Shabana, her seething anger ruins the Nawab. Between the two, Chandan Mohan becomes the scapegoat.

The novel opens with a beautifully worded description of the village and its realities. The tension during Muharram procession is realistic and the ingenuity with which Chandan Mohan diffuses the tension is endearing. Somehow, Chandan Mohan catches readers' fancy. Despite his goodness and guilelessness, he is the accursed being haunted by serpents around him, in the village, in his home, in the vicinity of the house, in his dreams and finally in his life. It is coil of the she-serpent Nagina that finally strangulates him. Chandan Mohan is a philanthropic young man, contented with his simple life with his wife Dularia and a child Aditya. The villagers have stories to tell about his monstrous act when he and Nawab Hashmi dishonoured Shabana and her father for harbouring Shabana's lover in their home. The shock kills the father, the family is obliged to leave the village, they face untold misery till finally Shabana commits suicide. The real story of revenge begins when Najama—Shabana's younger sister—poses as Nagina, plays with Nawab Hashmi's sentiments, drains him of all his wealth and possessions and finally becomes the cause of his “natural” death. She then traps Chandan Mohan. The union turns out to be fatal as Chandan Mohan turned Chand Mohammad, falls an easy prey to her charms. The naive Chandan Mohan we know metamorphoses into a greedy and lecherous man under her spell. How does Nagina achieve all this without being detected? I would rather leave it to the readers to discover how the grand finale is reached.

Some plus points of the novels are its plot, the author's ability to keep suspense alive till the end and the thorough planning of Najama. The language has grip though garnished with proverbial expressions like “cat going to pilgrimage after eating nine mice” (*nau nau choohe khakar billi Haj ko chalee*). The beginning of each chapter is absorbing, simple yet meaningful. For example, Chapter 16 begins thus, “human beings move so much in the fixed grooves of daily life that a slight deviation shakes their entire being.” Rural characters like Seth Karore Lal are convincing;

likewise Chandan Mohan's psychological tussle after he breaks his vow of eating nothing but *dalia* is true to life. The tension of the story is occasionally relieved by several splashes of rural wit and humour. No less delightful are humorous patches in the novel, such as, the description of the bus plying between Danpur and Lalitpur:

The bus-if yoking together rather tenuously with nuts and bolts the planks, the angled iron and the engine could be given this term-was a single example of what nature, human vandalism and the passage of time could do to reduce a mechanical beauty to a decrepit, rattling and tottering. With its front guard broken, with dark, glassless holes for its two headlights, and the leaking, the bus looked like an old woman, one-time an enviable object of beauty, now counting down her days, with missing teeth, dripping saliva and blind eyes groping her way in the village after her glamorous youth was spent on silky roads of glittering cities.

Every morning, the bus-cleaner would insert a long iron bar in its mouth and start giving turns as if he were helping a dinosaur clean its teeth with a neem-stick, or putting a long finger into Kumbhakaran's ear to awaken him from his empyrean slumber. A few naked with their fingers in their mouths or ears would anxiously gather to watch this curious exercise of awakening the mechanical giant (32-33).

What appears unconvincing is Najama's role as Nagina. It is dubious how she could guard her honour when she stayed with the Nawab as his wife. How could her mother leave her unquestioned? Probably, the author is aware of this lacuna that is why he lets Haseena console her daughter philosophically that end justifies the means.

If we do not raise too many "ifs" and "buts" and avoid dabbling into philosophical/ethical speculations, the novel makes an interesting read and is a welcome addition to Indian fiction in English. It is different, to say the least. The production is elegant and of high quality and has an attractive cover design.

