

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Since 2010

Vol. 5, Issue-I

February 2014

*The Criterion*



**5th Year of Open Access**

**Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)**

**Bi-monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal**

**Book Review: Shobha Nihalani's *Curse of the Kalingan- NINE* (Book One)**

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Shobha Nihalani's *Curse of the Kalingan- NINE* is a fantasy thriller which churns up an astonishing tale from the depths of ancient times. The novel is a mix of fact and fiction with an imaginary plot, while its foundation is based in historical fact. Nihalani has named the book after the legend of 'The Nine Unknown Men,' which is also the inspiration for the story. In the 3rd century BCE, this secret society was founded by King Ashoka. It is often cited as one of the oldest secret societies in the world, and is believed to still exist today, with the Nine holding tremendous powers and knowledge, which were handed down through the ages.

The historical background of this story is engrained in the famous War of Kalinga. When Ashoka, the son of the Mauryan emperor Bindusara and the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, ascended the throne of Magadha in 273 B.C. treading in the footsteps of his forefathers he set out to expand his empire. In the 12th year of his reign, he sent a message to Kalinga asking its submission, but the Kalingaraj refused to submit to the Mauryan Empire.

As a result Ashoka lead a huge army against Kalinga. This took place in 261 B.C.; the freedom loving people of Kalinga offered a stiff resistance to the Mauryan army. The whole of Kalinga turned into a battle arena. History offers us but few examples of such fiercely fought wars as this. The Kalingaraj himself commanded his army in the battle field. However, the limited forces of Kalinga were no match for the overwhelming Magadha army. Contrary to Ashoka's expectations, the people of Kalinga fought with such great valor that on number of occasions they came very close to a victory. The soldiers of Kalinga perished in the battlefield fighting till their last breath for their independence. The victory ultimately rested with Ashoka.

The war took a tremendous toll of life and property. The 13th rock edict of Ashoka throws light on this war. Atleast 0.1 million Kalingans were killed while another 0.15 million were taken prisoners. And almost equal numbers of Magadha soldiers were also killed. There was not a single man left in Kalinga to live a life of slavery.

This is the singular instance of a war in history which brought about a complete change of heart in a stern ruler like Ashoka. The scene of the war presented a horrible sight, the whole terrain was covered with the corpses of soldiers, wounded soldiers groaned in severe pain, vultures

hovered over their dead bodies, orphaned children mourning the loss of their nears and dears, widows looked blank and despaired.

This sight overwhelmed Ashoka. He realized that his victory at such a cost is not worthwhile. The whole war resulted in Ashoka's deviation towards Buddhism and after two and a half years he became an ardent follower of Buddhism under Acharya Upgupta.

From the corpses of the Kalingan warriors rose an angry spirit bent upon avenging the Kalinga empire, destroying the Nine and using their hidden knowledge to rule the world and change its destiny. In the fictional narrative of the present time (21<sup>st</sup> century), the bloodthirsty warrior possesses the body of a young man, making him hunt down and kill the Nine one by one. Vayu King is the Kalingan possessed by a vengeful warrior spirit. Being a Kalingan, he is an arch enemy of King Ashoka – the founder of the secret society of the Nine. With a network of kala yogis, the Kalingan wants to exact his revenge by destroying Ashoka's legacy. Vayu easily targets three of the Nine with his Kalingan force and energy. The location of the rest remains unknown to him. But can the Nine be destroyed? It is the essential question being raised in the story regularly. These eternal yogis are the custodian of the secrets of knowledge the all-powerful knowledge – Knowledge that could change the destiny of every living being on earth. The legend continues...when Tara, Akash and Zubin are brought forward as the chosen ones named as the “Trinity” in order to carry forward the secrets of the society. Empowered with the knowledge, they get the responsibility to fight Vayu and his alter ego – the powerful Kalingan. Lise is a Dutch woman who carries the secret locations of the nine ancient texts from her mentor, who communicated telepathically before he died. Tara, Akash and Zubin are from different parts of the world, they meet Lise in North India where a monk brings them into awareness of their true purpose and guides them on how to use their superhuman abilities. They fight harder to battle with the Kalingan and make it possible to protect the secret of the ancient society.

Shobha Nihalani's vast research is clearly visible in the narrative where she has gone through brilliant detailing of each and every aspect as well as the very contexts used in her story. Must say, this is an exceptional genre to conceive and emulate by an Indian author. The writer deserves all accolades for serving a historical fantasy thriller for the readers of all around world.

### **About Shobha Nihalani**

Shobha Nihalani is an author who previously worked as a copywriter and journalist. The writer's debut novel was *Karmic Blues* and her other novel is *The Silent Monument*. Shobha Nihalani is known as a writer of thrilling fiction. Her books are spiced with murders, chases, fierce characters, and storylines that draw a lot from ancient Indian history.

Nihalani has worked as a copywriter, bookkeeper, teacher, salesperson, and journalist before becoming an author. Apart from writing novels; Nihalani also writes a humour column and blog posts. She and her family reside in Hong Kong.