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***Bird In the Sky*, by Basavaraj Naikar, Bangalore: CVG Books, 2015, Pp. 208, Price: Rs.295.**

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Obviously enough, the novelist who attempts to deal with the hagiography of a saint in his novel needs to be extra careful to avoid from being caught in the trap of biography. Incidentally speaking, hagiographies when tried to be sculpted as novels are more likely to become biographies and not novels for a variety of reasons. First of all, saints or savants are not society-centric caught in the milieu of life and also in the melee of people. They are detached from the mundane world though the role of most of them would be that of saviours of people and not the ones to be saved. Therefore, such persons remain, in the spiritual sense, alone and aloof mentally, morally, ethically and physically. They get neither influenced by the worldliness nor affected by the sights or senses which otherwise play havoc in the lives of the common. They remain single in the world of their own creation which could hardly be understood by the rest let alone a novelist. Aren't they, in this sense, above board? So the life of a saint could at best be a material for a hagiography or a biography. And if any writer ventures to transform such a one's life into a novel and produces one with justifiable credentials richer would be this most popular literary form and its writer must be called a gifted one and congratulated. Well, this is the impression that one gets registered in mind after reading Professor. Basavaraj Naikar's *Bird in the Sky*, a fictionalised story of Siddharudha Bharati of Hubballi in Karnataka, India.

The challenge, first of all, that the novelist, Basavaraj Naikar faced in this work was to identify the place of the saint in relation to his followers or devotees or the spiritual proclivities of his followers. This way he has successfully transformed the hagiographical material into a block of subject to sculpt and then smelt in words to bring out the best in both, the longing of the mundane to spiritualise life to escape from the drudgery of life and the mission of the godly one to guide the mundane. This way the novelist could connect the two divergent and unrelated people whose ultimate goal of life is the same, spiritualise oneself and lead a peaceful life. What Basavaraj Naikar does in his inimitable narrative is the same by way of portraying the mighty saint, Siddharudha, in all his spiritual glory and grandeur. The number of people, both men and women, who get connected with the Master and bask in the balmy sunlight of his spiritual exuberance, are too many. In fact his was an all inclusive canvas on which the strokes of Basavaraj Naikar paint both the big and the small in all their true colours and thus producing a

healthy and homogeneous community of peace loving people whose castes of birth or background in life are of little or no consequence. In doing so Basavaraj Naikar asserts himself very convincingly, of course, as an adept in transforming hagiographies into wonderful novels. His style and art of presentation match his extraordinary ability to grapple with such abstract things as saints, their teachings and the assortment of problems that their followers come up with.

Siddharudha Bharati was born on March 26, 1836 at Chalakapur near the city of Bidar in Karnataka and passed away on August 21, 1929 at the ripe age of 94 years. He was believed to be the reincarnation of the 16th century saint-philosopher-poet-composer, Nijaguna Shivayogi, probably the greatest of such luminaries. Siddharudha Bharathi too was gifted with rare faculties, but of a different kind and denomination. He was destined to be a guru of the masses, saviour of the troubled souls. Though a Lingayat by birth, he rather transcended the limits of all religions and became an *Arudha*, one who was above the trammels of religion and practices. Such extraordinary and unusual signs of a completely freed soul were noticeable in him since his childhood. Being peripatetic in nature he was a bird in the sky and the sky is described as infinite. Some love to call it as Infinite Void and many equate it with formless form of God, the Supreme Reality. Similarly human soul is identified with a bird, a living thing gifted with wings which aid it to navigate in the Infinite Void or in God's eternity. Siddharudha was such a winged soul, a symbol of eternal quest of the human soul in search of God. Imagine now, how befitting is the title of the novel for the tale it tells!

The number of spiritual encounters with people that Siddharudha had had in his pretty long life runs to a couple of thousands whom he knew personally. And the number of people who heard his mesmerizing spiritual discourses was countless. No wonder, he was called *Vedanta Kesari*, (The Lion of Vedanta). We are surprised to hear that greats like Mahatma Gandhi, Lokamanya Tilak and saints like Swami Shivananda too had heard him speak. Legend has it that his ways and works swayed whoever crossed his path. Such was his divine persona and it is the good fortune of English readers that Basavaraj Naikar has captured in this novel the arcane details of a trail blazing story of a saint and presented it to them.

One more last thing to be said: the relevance of such accounts. Can't we (the present day society) find respite in such enduring accounts and find peace in life? Are we not suffering from an inexorable ennui of body, mind and spirit caused by our reluctance or indiscreetness in accepting things absolutely necessary for life and rejecting out rightly the ones harmful to our peaceful coexistence? We rely upon the bookish knowledge of marriage counsellors, family counsellors, psychiatrists and such other so called experts to get our personal and social problems solved. They read human body, as though it were a machine. Juxtaposed to them spiritual giants like Siddharudha read it as a fit home for

God to live in and help it receive divine grace. In this context the words of Kabiradasa, a Muslim devotee of the Master, are noteworthy. He says, 'What matters, who the person is, who shows you the way to heaven?' (p.129) Siddharudha is conceived and portrayed in the novel as an incarnation of love and compassion. He volunteers to bless the woman who had poisoned the food he was served to eat. Such instances abound in this work and each one of them has the ring of truth. Siddharudha was a saint of very recent origin and there might be some people still alive who had seen and talked to him personally and no wonder if they recall that he was divine in many ways than one who trod this earth seeking the well being of all.

Dr. Basavaraj Naikar seems to have written this novel with ease in the comfort of his personal exposure, though indirectly, to the divinity and deeds of the saint. That is why the novel as a whole with so many events and incidents strung together demanded the speed, as it were, with which it is being written. The writer's eagerness to present the subject is self-evident in his racy and catchy style he employs through out the work. Another notable feature of the novel is that one can start reading it from any page moving back and forth with little or no loss. But the cumulative effect of reading it from cover to cover is something like a revelation that one has to experience personally. Basavaraj Naikar has broken a new ground in transforming a hagiography into a wonderful work of literary art for which he deserves our unqualified appreciation and admiration. *Bird in the Sky* has definitely enriched the realm of Indian English fiction.