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**Bhaunri: A Novel by Anukruti Upadhyay, Publisher: Fourth State India,
Year: 2019, Language: English, ISBN: 978-9353570033, Pages: 150**

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Introduction

Anukruti Upadhyay, a post-graduate in Management and Literature, and a graduate in Law writes both in English and Hindi; Daura and Bhaunri are her first publications in English. She divides her time between Mumbai and Singapore.

On the fabric of Bhaunri novella, Anukruti has added primitive and modern, religion and superstition, fable and fiction, songs and scene, curse and cure, history and folklore elements. This has resulted in an exquisite feast. It has an intriguing and captivating plot which keeps the reader hooked to the story. The moment one feels that something predictable is going to happen then she gives it a new twist to the story. The cover of the book is an embossed tribal girl, designed in collaboration with Gonda tribal artists. The book is a debut novel of the author. It is a story of a nomadic tribe of Rajasthan. It seems to be a well-researched work depicting the rites, traditions and the surroundings of this tribe.

Bhaunri

The story is a quintessentially bold and brash depiction of a blacksmith girl, Bhaunri. In the beginning of the story, there is a detailed description of Bhaunri's personality. Her parents had a kind of love marriage. Her mother was from Gujjar's community. She was married to an impotent man. So, she eloped with her father, who is an ironsmith. When her ex-husband accused her, she asserts, "Ask the gardener whether he sowed any seed". Her mother is an assertive woman who follows her heart. It was her mother who made her father elope with her. Unlike traditional women, she retorts, taunts, debates and fights. In a way, Bhaunri learned the skills of both the communities.

When Bhaunri married off to Bheema, a Gadolia Lohars, her life undergoes a great transformation and paradigm shift. From a skylark singing here and there, she is confined to home. She falls in love with her husband. It turns the tale into a tale of obsession, possession,

dominance, independence and eroticism. She thought that her husband would remain honest and faithful to her. However, he was a philanderer and lived his life like a playboy. With time, she discovers many facts and dark secrets of the households such as: on the arrival of her mother-in-law's sister, the placid surroundings of the house became turbulent and had ruffles on the lives of others. Bhaunri's father-in-law set his eyes on her and troubled her life. However, Bhaunri later learned from her father-in-law that she too loved him and wanted to be with him. But she couldn't bear the pang of her sister and committed suicide. After this Mangla went mad. There is a rift between Bheema and his father. Bhaunri's character grows subsequently. Like her mother, she is audacious, obstinate and assertive. When she comes to know about her husband's mistress, Khateek's daughter. Her mother-in-law tells her to accept her lot docilely, "A woman's lot is always pain", to which she retorts, "I shall not suffer... If I do, so shall he". Her husband beats her for her brazen and insolent behaviour. Despite succumbing injuries at the hand of her husband, she doesn't lose her hold. Ultimately, she paralyses him while intervening in the scuffle between father and son.

Authenticity

A good writer is one who makes his /her readers to have a sense of authenticity and reliability. Anukruti stands to this test of her readers. There is a diligent and exquisite delineation of some customs of the tribe. But one doesn't get bored with them or find them as a regressive or digressive material. One reads with pleasure and enjoy every ounce of it. We learn the traditions of tribes in rich details as "decorated with dhal, ghunghar and patti of real silver", "gaali song", "bidai songs" etc. Not only that Anukruti Upadhyay has given us a well-researched documentary of flora and fauna of the local terrain. It also serves eateries such as: tikkad, chapatis with cow milk and butter, sweet kheer, gwar and sangria, kheepoli, mateeri etc. Anukruti has retained some local words too as samdhin, akhada, banka gabru, baoli, Dhola, lada, ghunna, odhani, hookah, Beedani, rasiya, chillum, diyas, shikakai, jajman etc. The novella has a wonderful fragrance of Rajasthan soaked in Churma bati. The language of the novella is simple and coloured with many local metaphors and similes. It is a rich texture delineating Rajasthani tribal culture. Indianisation of English is also evident as "black kasauti stone", "Nothing wrong...except your head, which is filled to the brim with cow dung", "May you have many sons and die wearing the red odhani of a suhagan", "You keep me tied to your odhanp's end" and others.

Different shades

There is a tinge of magic realism too in the novella, as in the description of the dog transforming the entire pack of dogs into soldiers and deceiving the enemy's army. The novella offers how a girl child is welcomed among tribes. While in high caste, "who wore long faces when a girl was born to them, sometimes bribing the midwives to smother the baby or feed her opium". It makes one think: are we really advanced or how backward we are. The book is a rich tapestry of theme, narrative and characterization. It gives an insight into the lives of tribal people of India. One can't help but muse about the character of Bhaunri.

Quotes

There are some wonderfully enduring lines and thoughts that keep the spirit of the book lively:

Deceiver is twice as polite as anyone else.

Don't imagine snake under every shade-tree.

Hearing the truth hurts worse than a scorpion's sting.

As there are mouths, so there is chatter.

The greater the jealousy, the worse the gossip.

There's nothing like love to keep a man, and nothing like love to drive him away too.

Love doesn't fear anything, it doesn't even fear losing love itself.

Even sandalwood catches fire if rubbed too long.

Old injuries don't heal by themselves, they get worse with time.

There is no pain like the pain of separation when your heart is joined to another's.

The older the banayan tree, the stronger it is.

The teacher being jaggery but the disciple turning out to be the finest sugar.

A blind man only sees darkness everywhere.

It is better for the body to endure than for the heart to be snared. It only brings suffering.

Before all else, heart must meet. Unless hearts meet, everything else is burden of sin and must be thrown off.

Conclusion

It is a wonderfully crafted novel that invites reader of every age to share the wisdom and enchanting story of the novel. The novel is redolent with the resonance of Rajasthani culture.

The book could have been lengthened but it might lose its charm with the increase of size. It keeps readers musing and mulling over the ending as it has an indetermined ending. It leaves readers energised and revived with its vivid and thought-provoking narration. The protagonist with her wilfulness, bold and indomitable courage asserts for her equality: “No, my share is the same as his. He and I are two parts joined together. How could his share be different from mine? I shall not suffer, Mai. If I do, so shall he...”. The simple, lucid language of the novel is ever refreshing.