

THE FINISH OF HONESTY BY MONI MOHSIN

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Abstract:

Perched on the edge of a car seat, Rani and Laila hurtled towards a love story ...' Western Pakistan, the winter of 1971, and nine-year-old Laila has a secret. Ignored by the adults around her yet desperate to know their world, Laila takes comfort in being the confidant of teenager Rani - privy to details of the older girl's forbidden love affair. But when that affair bears unwelcome fruit, a floundering Rani leans on Laila for solace and support. Yet Laila - still a child - neither comprehends the danger nor is able to help; and thus unwittingly leads Rani towards catastrophe.

DISCUSSION

Nine-year-old Laila is spending her winter vacation at her family estate in Sabzbag, along with ayah and grandma. For company she has Rani, the teenage granddaughter of a family retainer. Rani falls in love, gets pregnant and hell breaks loose in feudal Pakistan. The fundamental premise is rich with possibility: the friendship between two young girls, both inhabiting the same physical space but belonging to different social realms. But Moni is not content with writing a simple, coming-of-age tale, she also wants this to be a coming-of-age story of a country. Can any novel from the subcontinent be taken seriously unless it talks about the nation? The 1971 war hovers in the background, an unwilling, faceless servant to the watery plot.

The tone is highly uneven. Parts of the novel read like an Enid Blyton family saga (Laila's mother asks her children to 'pipe down'), parts like an Inspector Ghote whodunit. Some of the romantic passages could be straight out of Mills and Boon: "the whispering squirt of perfume", "a crimson bud of jealousy unfurled in Laila's stomach", and, my favourite, "Rani shut her eyes and savoured the feathery caress of his voice." Like a bad Balaji scriptwriter, she uses coincidence to further the narrative. Weeks after a murder, a passing policeman chances upon his quarry lying drunk in a gutter, muttering his victim's name. Convenient. Some descriptions come dangerously close to corny television: "...Rani's face would drift before her closed eyelids, wavy, frondlike, a reflection on water...The image would dissolve suddenly, as if a stone had been hurled into water."

Laila's grandmother, Sardar Begum, is the only character who comes alive in the entire novel. Anyone with a Punjabi granny will be able to recognise in Begum a classic type: "She yearned for the big masculine world outside; for news of local elections won and lost...fluctuations in the market." While the husband reads Hafiz and Ibn Khaldun, she minutely examines "registers and ledgers". After his death she takes over, becoming a far more efficient farmer than him. She prefers to remember her placid and bookish husband with an atypical gilt-framed photograph: "It showed a portly, young man in jodhpurs and turban astride a stallion, with a falcon perched on his wrist."

LITERATURE REVIEW

The End of Innocence is unusual in its setting: the rural farmland of West Punjab, delineated in its changing colours and seasons with the minimal brush-strokes of a Japanese artist. The simple, sensuous prose reflects the multilingual world in which its child protagonist lives, moving easily from Western references to translations of local proverbs and citations of folklore. Sabzbagh, the name of the village, translates as "Greengarden", which is no doubt symbolic as it can denote, in Urdu, a world of illusion.

The pace of the novel is leisurely and at times hypnotic; dramatic momentum is built up late, crowding events into its last third. Though the central perspective is Laila's, we see the world through a range of viewpoints. Laila's liberal father, her well meaning but self-centred mother, her widowed matriarch of a grandmother all have their say. Such a technique demands, perhaps, an inevitable sacrifice of intimacy.

Mohsin's novel is set in 1971; a careful attempt is made to parallel Laila's loss of innocence with the division of Pakistan, when Bangladesh demands independence and India steps in. The threat of war surfaces in conversations. A guest reflects on past and future: "We weren't meant to split, to shatter. I was there when the country was made." Echoing her 30 years later, Laila's father claims: "We will not go to war again. If nothing else, we've learnt how ruinously expensive it can be."

Eight-year-old Laila is born into a Pakistani Punjabi family which could easily be an Indian one. She has the same liberal, English-speaking parents, is spoilt and petted by the domestic servants and has a doting grandmother who bemoans her sundarkened skin. Laila devours Enid Blyton and is constantly on the lookout for "mysteries" to solve.

Exactly the way I grew up. Except that running through the book, like a grim leitmotif, is a fear and hatred of Indians. A village boy brags of a brother who is a soldier "strong as a bull. I bet the Indians run like squawking chickens when they see him". A peasant becomes an instant hero by recounting how he shook his fist at an Indian plane, shouting, "Get out of here, you coward!" And a belligerent Colonel looks forward to giving "the Indians a bloody nose". Granted, the story is set in 1971, when east Pakistan had started its bid for Independence, but the jingoism of the west Pakistanis is disquieting, particularly when it is coupled with a haughty condescension towards their eastern compatriots. Laila's parents are the only ones who question this attitude towards their fellow Pakistani citizens, but theirs is not the popular view and is seen as being of a piece with their liberal-minded approach towards social inferiors.

Against this backdrop Laila, a child of privilege, forms a friendship with Rani, the teenage grand-daughter of a family servant and unwittingly betrays her by an act which unleashes tragic consequences upon the community, and not least upon Laila herself. We leave her asking her father, "How long before India invades us?" By now Laila is 38 and the year is 2001, when India is desperate to play economic catch-up with China. Brilliantly told, this is a coming of age story which explores social mores, national prejudices, family ties and the nature of guilt. It is a tale of innocence corrupted by pervasive paranoia. Pakistani paranoia, as much as ours, seen in reflection.