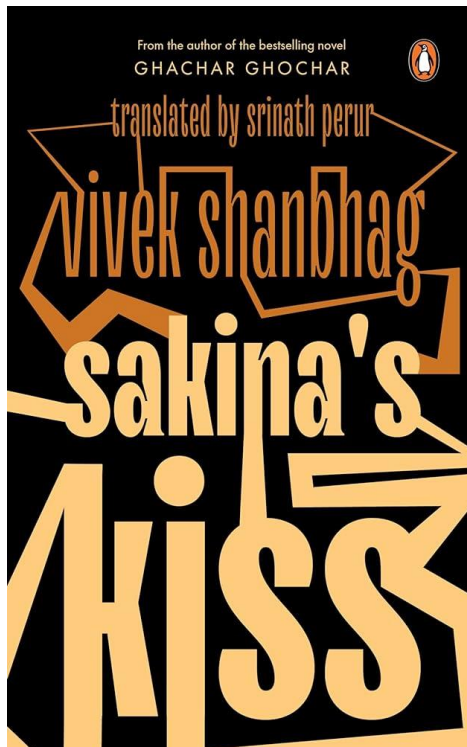




Book review

Vivek Shanbhag's *Sakina's Kiss*



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Some stories stay with the reader for their sheer volubility, for the satisfying clarity they bestow upon the reader, in terms of the wealth of information. Some others prevail in the memory, chiefly for the absence of the same. These later say things without saying and tap on myriads of spaces, say, politics, culture, patriarchy, history, and others, all simultaneously via implication, something that language alone, because of its very

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nature and constitution cannot evoke. Every day, we are becoming aware of this 'lack' or 'poverty' in language. We are all probably moving towards a future where words alone will not be enough, when shunning its former supremacy, it has to come down and share space with other, alternative forms of expression. The book, I review here does something similar. Published on 9th October, 2023, legendary Kannada writer, Vivek Shanbhag's *Sakina's Kiss*, translated into English by the equally gifted Srinath Perur, is a miraculous testament to the aesthetics of implication, to the weight of silences and calculated omissions.

Shanbhag is a pure magician. A few pages into the novel the reader feels as if he is amid a nail-biting suspense thriller. The peace of a rich, complacent, Bengaluru-based bourgeois family is turned on its head overnight, when Rekha, the robust, free-spirited daughter goes missing, while on a bus journey from her ancestral place in Malnad. To add fuel to the foreboding, strangers with connections to the city's seedy underworld approach Venkat, the family's head, enquiring after Rekha. Thereafter an intense chase ensues. With Venkat and his spouse Viji, setting out in search of their only daughter, the narrative moves back and forth, weaving into the quest elements as diverse as gender discrimination, political corruption, past ancestral disputes over land, Venkat's disillusionment with the highly specialized, fast-paced, profit-mongering corporate culture of Bengaluru, where jobs apparently have no connection with the academic degrees earned by an individual; the constant urge for socio-economic upliftment, issues of caste, class and finally an anti-capitalist, revolutionary strain in the form of figures such as the Naxalite rebel Ramana, reporter Suresh and Rekha's liberal-minded teacher Surendran. Thus, what begins deceptively as a thriller ends in a profound, at places, wry meditation upon how power operates in society in general and within the family in particular.

The novel ends but does not achieve a closure. Very little is said and a great deal more is suggested, leaving the reader in a state of flustered unease. In the manner of the eminent German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, Shanbhag too is seen here making a demand on the intellectual faculties of his reader, prodding him to take action and arrive at his conclusion to the story. As an added twist, the eponymous Sakina of *Sakina's Kiss* remains a figure shrouded in mystery, inhabiting only the margins of the plot. She occupies only two pages of a one-forty-eight pages novella. Even there, her identity and her whereabouts are kept a secret. We know her only as Ramana's lover. The author here brilliantly subverts the time-honored convention of naming books, by choosing to name his novella, not after the most but after the least developed of his characters.

The two-faced unreliable narrator Venkat further accentuates the delicious complexity of the book. He seems to emerge from the same established tradition of sly, unreliable narrators that house such greats as the Duke in Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* (1842) and the tactful pedophile Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). As in his previous masterpiece, *Ghochar* (2015), Shanbhag extracts snippets from ordinary, day-to-day lives and casts them in a new light. Something as insignificant as Viji's flinging away Venkat's hand makes him, at a later date, muse thus:

“For some reason, Viji’s ... behaviour towards me flashes in front my eyes. Among everything else, the way she pulled her hand away from mine in the bus. What if I had grabbed it by force? I should have. A woman can make a scene if a stranger touch her in a bus. But what can she do when it’s her husband?” (Shanbhag, 2023/2023, p.145) This tiny fragment finds Venkat changing before our very eyes. We realize that he is not as broad-minded as he pretends to be, that deep down he too believes in exerting control over women and subordinating the female sex as his conservative father and uncle have done before. In another instance, he secretly sides with a snollygoster who proposes a ban on revealing clothes vis-à-vis women, as propaganda to advance his political interests. A decent white-collar job and a place in a posh urban set-up have not erased but turned inward patriarchal gender prejudices. Flickers of such devastating intensity are strewn all over this slender volume. Irony and sweet sarcasm serve as vehicles, sharpening the intensity of its situations and predicaments. While going through it, the reader will be repeatedly moved to question the otherwise naturalized values, beliefs, and cultural practices of the society. And what astonishes us more is that Shanbhag accomplishes so alarmingly extensive a task within the span of a short one-day-road trip from Bengaluru to Malnad.

While I appreciate the silences, a little lighter on the plot would have helped the novella’s fruition. The young, sensitive Ramana comes off as a very promising character. The reader in me is left craving to know more about him and his predicament. The author conceals also the bare minimum as regards Rekha’s disappearance. The concluding apartment break-in, too, is unfounded. Some of these loose ends if brought together would have enhanced manifold the appeal of the book. Grinding pressures of corporate life, forgotten commitments, hassles of parenting, hauntings from the past, passive bourgeois mediocrity that will resist action against societal vices as long as they don’t affect them personally and a deeply stratified and iniquitous social system are among the few highlights that season this little jocoserious treat of a novel. A must-read for all those who love thrillers garnished with eclectic selections from almost every other literary genre. An insightful, jarring, postmodern book par excellence.

Paboni Sarkar has recently completed her Master’s Degree in English from the University of Calcutta, College Street Campus. She is now preparing for the upcoming UGC-NET examination in June 2024. So far, she is only 3-publications-old, and all of them were duly published in the different issues of the TMYS Review Journal.
