Kavita A. Jindal. *Manual For A Decent Life.* London: Linen Press, 2020. PB & e-book. pp. 443. Price: £9.99, US$ 15. ISBN: 978-1-8380603-8-1.

Reviewed by
Gabrielle Barnby*

Jindal delivers an odyssey with *Manual For A Decent Life*, a portrait of one woman and the social web that supports and holds her. A woman whose strength is her own.

I am grateful to have been brought to Jindal's work through a collection of short stories *May We Borrow Your Country* by The Whole Kahani. These writers are new territory for me, I am curious to explore further.

Jindal's voice is direct, her narrative crammed with detail after detail. She does not give the 'feel' of a place she grabs the reader by the hand and points at people's cloths, pushes dishes of fragrant food beneath the reader's nose, she whispers behind her hand about sexual attraction.

The central character Waheeda is a muslim single mother, but religion and family ties cannot hold her, cannot define her. Her odyssey through the political and social whirl of Delhi remains grounded in the life events of her friends and family. Compromises must be made between duty and desire, privacy is constantly in conflict with public roles and expectations.

Jindal allows the reader to be privileged to many aspects of life for Indian women. Her female characters span a broad spectrum of social and political viewpoints, there are socialites, climbers, home-makers, traditionalists and radicals. She exposes the desires and complexities of life, from the pressures on professional women to dress and conduct themselves in particular kind of way (no skirts, only trousers) to the fundamental issue of separate toilets to promote female education in the provinces. Jindal also explores the pressure on men to be married and continue their family legacy and the stigma against homosexuality, divorce and childlessness.

Waheeda's liaison with Monish is central to her strength, but she does not want to be dependent on him. She wants release, physical satisfaction and understanding. She organises liaisons when she can fit them into her timetable. The question remains in the reader's mind, how much does Waheeda control her availability and how much is she manipulated by others?

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The collage of Delhi life is dynamic, but underlying strictures of tradition still control life. The growth of Waheeda's ambitions is not without risk. As her public success increases so do the risks of her relationship with Monish. Her honesty, her desire and her fallibility draw the reader through twists and turns to the terrible climax of the narrative.

Manual For A Decent Life is a novel filled with energy and sensuality, and Jindal serves a satisfying feast for the adventurous reader.

A manual is a set of instructions, guidelines for how to use an item correctly, to its fullest capacity. This is indeed what Waheeda does with the life she is given. Life directed under her control is full and rich. However, so much more is beyond her control. Beyond the guidelines of tradition, politics and society, in these dark uncharted places, this is where heartbreak lies.

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