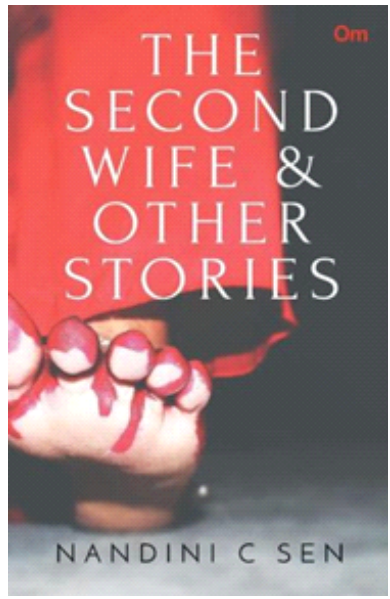
Book Review

Nandini C. Sen. *The Second Wife & Other Stories*. New Delhi: Om Books International, 2022, pp. 184, PB, Price: US $ 8.99, ISBN: 978-93-91258-955.

Reviewed by
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Nandini Sen's recent collection of short stories is a delightful read for multiple and varied reasons. It is a bouquet of eleven short stories that are well-crafted. They are narrated in an engaging manner and in a candid and easy style. The stories have powerful, memorable characters who tease you, haunt you and inspire you long after you finish reading about them. Sen takes up raging, social issues that are fit for erudite, academic discussion but handles them with a critical restraint, that is rare among scholars turned creative writers. It is indeed, remarkable that she steers clear of the jargon associated with the issues she foregrounds and yet manages to convey the conceptual underpinnings embedded in such discourse very well. This makes the book truly delightful as it communicates well with the uninitiated fiction reader as well as scholars and readers from the academia. The stories incorporate the theoretical notions and ways of analysis of issues, in a tightly structured and absorbing narrative of people from vulnerable and privileged sections of our society. The narrative is, invariably, linear and straight but so absorbing that the reader allows oneself to be led with the course of its flow.

"The Sapphire Ring" is an exception in its use of memory and the flashback technique to weave a tale of love, jealousy and betrayal. This story's power lies in its interweaving of the Naxalbari movement with the contours of love for Geeta by two brothers, an activist while the other is a bourgeois, infatuated lover. The focus, however, centres on the two powerful women in this story, the Naxal Geeta and the

suave book agent Sara. The Naxalbari movement is not presented as a mere backdrop. In fact, the love story lays bare the rigours of the Naxals, their convictions, commitment and their modus operandi at the grassroots. Sen's stories make a powerful juxtaposition of well etched characters and stark, realistic depiction of their social context. The content, context and the form of this story integrate well with the evoking of Time, nostalgia, regret, guilt and owning up of responsibility, both personal and social. Most of the stories in this collection do not reflect the adventurous mixing of thought, form and narrative. "The Sapphire Ring" is one story wherein, Sen dares to experiment and also delve into the consciousness of a male protagonist.

"Lipstick" explores a mother's denial, learning and acceptance of her son's alternate sexual identity. The trans teen is not given an overt voice in the story but the mother's journey is well documented. The single mother's travails, aspirations, her trans phobia and the process of unlearning and overcoming of her apprehensions are empathetically portrayed. An interesting development in the story is the entry of a young student, Joy, who is pursuing a PhD and develops an endearing bond with the protagonist Malati, an attendant at the library. The story thus shows the possibility of bonding and friendship among women, despite differences in their age, class and educational background. Malati cooks and feeds Joy who in turn, helps Malati to reckon with the need for making personal choices, to accept her son for what he is. Malati's world widens as Joy facilitates her interaction with self-help groups and other parents. At the end of the story, it is the mother who comes out of the closet, frees herself from received notions regarding sexuality and emerges as "a new woman." So much happens in this short, crisp tale that one marvels at Nandini Sen's easy marshalling of theory and praxis, plot and character, stasis and movement, performativity and self-transformation.

But not all stories shape up so organically. Some of them like "Nabonita", "The Santhal Maid" depict how hapless young women affirm agency and get even with their oppressor but in a mode that borders on wish fulfilment and poetic justice. It is an oblique indication of the lacunae in the process of social justice but their decisions push them to a heroic mode that is anachronistic. In both these stories, Sen excels, however, in unmasking middle class hypocrisy, co-option of women from privileged sections with powerful patriarchs and reveals a few good-hearted men who stay passive and ineffective.

A recurring strand in this collection of stories pertains to the heart-warming bonding among women, often cutting through stereotypes well etched in our collective consciousness. The daughter-in-law carries forward her mother-in-law's legacy

but without compromising her individuality ("Thammi"); a step-mother loves and grooms her step-son with much affection and foresight, unmindful of how people label her or slander her ("Queen Kaikeyi"); a celebrity journalist reaches out to her former husband's love-child as an act of solidarity and humane concern ("Happy Times"); a doctor agrees to testify in favour of her patient, a battered wife ("Deliverance"): these are instances that affirm hope and solidarity, quite eloquently.

Sen's portrayal of middle-class women is far more accurate and without poetic strokes or nostalgic reverie (which intrude into her depiction of the non-urban ones), for instance in "The Performer" or "Laila". The story "Laila" is interesting as it is a heady mix of humour, romance, quirkiness, traumatic childhood memories and a neat 'all iz well' ending. The courage and agency of a homemaker who renews her passion for performing on stage, facilitated by her son's cricket coach is brilliantly told. The arrogance and selfishness of the husband from an elite, privileged class and the warmth and sincerity of a provincial coach are well brought out. Friendship and mentoring happen from the most unexpected quarters, cutting across class, gender and language barriers in this story. This is yet another story that holds out hope and positivity that encompass the characters and beckon to the readers as well.

This is an excellent collection but a tad staid with regard to form and style. Innovative narrations and experimentation in story-telling are sorely lacking. Invariably narrated by an omniscient narrator, most of the stories are well-told but not differently. One looks forward to interesting experimentation and creative adventures in Sen's next collection.

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