

Book Review 1

Gulmohars and Kaners and Other Stories

Reviewed by: **Rajbir Deswal**

Author Sonika Sethi

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She weaves plots literally out of thin air. Though there aren't any apparitions seen, or blood chilling, yet she maneuvers and makes manifest, even what is occult, parapsychical, mysterious and supernatural. She is adept at springing surprises, mostly so racy, that one finds oneself edgy enough, to sustain not even a near lull, but just going full throttle, in ones indulgence of reading—what next! Here lies her power to capture the readers' mind. Her ability to not only hold suspense is quintessential, but rather, she goes several notches up in releasing it, with a sudden twist in the tale. At times one is intrigued, if she had the climax in mind already, or she wove one towards the end, when she might have thought that her account was ripe enough to be wound up.

Sonika Sethi, a doctorate holder, and a raconteur par excellence, knows her expertise in what is known in Urdu literature as Dastangoi—story telling. She has an appropriated nuance, of the entire semantics she has at her command. Sonika seems to almost 'taste every word on the tip of the tongue' and then use it. Her vocabulary keeps giving intellectual challenge to even those who know and claim to be masters of English.

Her maiden collection of about twenty short stories packaged in “Gulmohars and Kaners and Other Stories” is a document which eminently falls in the Post-Colonial genres of English Literature. Every plot seems to be a pure piece of literature, endowed and equipped with all the necessary academic wherewithal needed, when it comes to appreciation of literary works. Her characters belong to places far off. The locales of her action lay elsewhere too. Even the names aren't only subcontinental. Mores and manners too are typical of the place she chooses for her plots to set in. Though weighed heavily on the side of Post-Colonial, she maintains her local touch also when she uses words like Baithak, Haveli, Batna, Bhootpret etc.

Sonika's accounts, running into twenty pages, or just two, do not make any difference to the reader, for she completes the action in a long-drawn narration, as also in a miniature one. Sample some of Sonika's stories which I will relate to, without letting go the suspense, the author wants her readers to live up to. “Gulmohars and Kaners” has lovelorn protagonists find themselves together at the end 'though differently.' “Twelve Steps” has a girl find her long dead twin-sister through the painting of an unknown artist. This story takes you to the height of occultism and parapsychical world. “Bring Her Down” is the doughty tale of a go-getter female, who takes an unusual step, to save her daughter from her kidnappers, though she had all her life been sought to be 'brought down' by the bullies around. “Present Indefinite” has surprise compelling looking back on the heroine's colourful past with her partner, juxtaposed with an equally bright present, with another likely-partner.

There are other very short stories running in just two or three pages but they have the action complete and sense conveyed. “I Love You” elucidates the life of people in their twilight years ending on a critical note. “The Twist” has the protagonist paid back in the same coin, as undesirable as she treated his soon-to-wed lover. “The Auction” has a marred, scared, pilfered, plundered, destroyed, discarded, entangled, strangled, smothered, withered, hunted, shunted, but still tender with affection' heart on sale.

“Blood is Thicker Than Water” has treason and palace-intrigues, still counting on the painful strength of familial relations. “The Gift” has treachery, deceit, and heart-break woven in a triangle of

protagonists. "Life After Death" is a one-page account where, 'the police records show only one casualty' while there were many in a family. "The Lost Battle" has a father placed in a defeated yet a prideful predicament.

Sonika has a wide variety of subjects to choose from. These are generally on the seamier side of human situations involving pain, misery, deceit, death, treason, treachery, loss, separation, suffering, nostalgia, suspense, supernatural and the unknown. Her style is of course too racy but she balances the jerks, how-so-ever foreign to the plot, in a way that make her narration more exciting and entertaining.

The author depends on her elephantine and sharp vocabulary and enjoys employing it further, beautifying the unfolding. Sample this, "The luscious Gulmohar and magnificent Kaners bore testimony to their vows. The euphonious thrumming of crickets, the sonorous crescendo of the cicadas in the thickets added to the polyphony created by nature and amidst all these sounds could they hear the pleasant plangent of their hearts beat for each other—a solemn vow to beat inextricably for the amaranthine love that would give them strength during this hiatus."

All she needs to rope in her accounts is a bit of humour, mirth, joy, playfulness and happy endings.