
Book review by Irene Dhar, Writer and Film Editor

The prologue of Manjushree's novel is called 'A Dream Forgotten'. It begins thus:

'The Woman standing in the kitchen is making rotis on the stove. She has made rotis all her life. It doesn't get any livelier. The dough is stuck on her hands; she can't wipe the sweat off her face. It is hot. Her face glows like the fire. The roti swells, like a three-quarter moon. The one glorious moment. She turns it around. It continues swelling, and then bursts open. Hot steam flows out, making her fingers numb. She turns the roti again. More steam comes out.'

It is a simple act of roti-making which has mesmerized the Woman, so much so that she can almost feel the one glorious moment when the roti comes into its own, swelling with pride. The woman is hot and sweaty, her hands are doughy, the roti bursts into flames and from therein, emerges the road to escape. Breeze upon her face, caked dough on her hands, she steps on the half-wet earth and begins her pilgrimage. It is a grasshopper's pilgrimage, as it hops in quest of an ever elusive all-encompassing moment of clarity. Perhaps the quest never ends, but each moment of peace, each glimpse of truth, compassion and lucidity makes the pilgrimage special. The quest was a forgotten dream that now magically comes alive.

A Grasshopper's Pilgrimage is the story of a young and pretty spiritual seeker, Gopika, whose biggest asset (and also perhaps her drawback) is that she is not bound by the conventions of sanity and propriety, and is a free spirit who likes to follow her heart and speak her mind. She works for a television channel, covering 'Navaratri' celebrations even as a part of her is always running away. From supposedly sane jobs that seem absurd, male attention that leaves her unsure, a family that she loves a lot... she is always hopping away. In quest of a meaning... to existence perhaps? She lands up at Ramesh Balsekar – a self-styled Guru's place and he becomes her spiritual guide. In a moment of clarity, she understands that we are all like screws in a huge piece of machinery, dispensing with a lot of delusions of the importance of self-realization. However, no insight is an ultimate and along with quietude, Gopika always manages to sense disquiet.

She hops off to a Vipassana course, and feels cleansed. Her quest continues though, as she meets the American Wayne - whom she'd like as a Guru but who wouldn't, Jonathan, Fareed. Brijbala, Bianca... and finally the pavement Guru. During the journey, the place that she connects with distinctly is a small temple town in South India, Tiruvannamalai with a mountain called Arunachala. She knows this is the place that she will always keep going back to.

Had A Grasshopper's Pilgrimage only been a book about a woman's spiritual quest / journey, I would have possibly found it boring. What makes the book interesting and extremely readable is that it is a woman's journey as she discovers herself, trying to figure through a maze of relationships, feelings, memories, longings and practicalities that make up her life. What makes the book particularly enjoyable is that it is written in an unpretentious and funny style, with the protagonist sometimes laughing at herself and her own hyper-sensitivity. Gopika is unapologetic about not being bound by conventions and comfortable with her physicality. She listens to and understands her body, and a woman's body is not about sexual gratification, it is many more experiences.

The most wonderful part about the book is the bond that Gopika shares with her grandmother. Of all the women in her life – her sister, mother, friends – her grandmother is the one who is possibly her soul mate. They share a warm camaraderie, indulging in leg-pulling, but also

sharing some soul-searching moments. Sample this. When Gopika confides in her grandmother that she's looking for a husband, grandma retorts:
'That ain't no secret. You have been looking for a guy since you were sixteen.'

Imagine a grandma who also shares sexual confidences with her granddaughter. A bit crazy perhaps, a bit irreverent, but also funny and warm. Like the tone of the book. Gopika invites the reader to join her in her journey and gradually casts a spell on you as you journey along. I loved the book but did have a few misgivings. I found some of the characters a bit sketchy. I wish the space was not so crammed with foreigners on a spiritual quest for they sometimes come close to being stereotypical, which is not what I'd like to experience during a journey that is otherwise unique. Manjushri writes in a style that is easy, often revealing her knack for observing details that pass a lot of us by. A Grasshopper's Pilgrimage is one where you'd like to hop aboard.

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Hopping into the inner self = Book review by **SumaaTekur**

The characters of A Grasshopper's Pilgrimage operate on a different, intangible plane. It's a world where people recognise each other from previous lifetimes, where "shining eyes" mean that the person is on a glowing spiritual path and where instincts and premonitions play out in life's drama exactly the way the mind had seen them. Gopika, a single PYT (pretty young thing) from Calcutta, braves the grime, dirt and the crowded train rides of Mumbai to work in a television channel, a perfectly sane job which she finds absurd. Gopika rebuffs potential boy friends, has long conversations on existential questions with her colleague, Sujata, and is on a hunt for a guru who can answer all her questions.

Her heart is hooked to various anchors as she flits from one guru to the next. In Mumbai, she finds solace in the teachings of spiritual teacher, Ramesh. He says that we are all nothing but screws in a large piece of machinery that is life. This becomes her life mantra.

Written in a simple and lucid style, A Grasshopper's Pilgrimage is not a book just about spiritual quest. It would then have been just another 170-odd pages added to the "fiction-spiritual" genre. The story is about a practical world that strives to meet conventional expectations and a world which wants to break the mould and start over. What makes the book a

pleasurable read is that the author has managed to find a meeting point for the two worlds — one that has not yet started asking questions and another that has all the questions and is struggling to find the answers. It would be more appropriate to call it the butterfly's pilgrimage, perhaps.

An in-depth review by a spiritual and religious author, **Raj Supe**

There are two levels at which I would like to look at this book. The spiritual and literary. At the spiritual level, the book leaves much to be desired. Its honesty, though an admirable virtue of form, does not transcend to the content. In fact, a kind of fictitious honesty, assertive of individual opinion or personal manifestation, in matters spiritual, I have come to think, is quite undesirable. It sets a bad precedent. The might of personal conviction/ interpretation has been defeating the scriptural wisdom for centuries, because anything literal made to seem true goes down as literal truth.

The seeker in your book, as a character, succeeds beautifully; it's the person named Gopika I mean. But the path is flawed and the culmination reached is both shallow and pretentious. The quest angle which is central to any pilgrimage or journey lacks the sheer fire and force.

There is no progress in the character of the protagonist, a seeker of "something" and it remains that way — vague, nebulous and untruly mystical even at the end of the book. Nothing is found, there's no discovery. There is nothing in the book to root Gopika's feelings or imaginations in reality. This seems rather whimsical.

First half of the book creates a pure and charming background for what is to follow by way of great journey, but our hopes are belied. We have nevertheless the consolation of reading an interesting story at yet another (that is, mundane) level.

I have a healthy disregard for what I call wayside spiritual romance (contrasted with plain and serious practice as taught in your favourite Gospel), a misdemeanour committed even by those who can tell wheat from chaff. It is a product of indulgence to which I too have been prone. But my regret is not that you wished it, my regret is that you landed into it quite inadvertently. You wished to relate the great event inside, but what you have on paper is a motley collection of events and no true spiritual journey. The events pretend but don't actually belong in a concrete Big Picture.

Somehow, the mix does not become. Ramesh or Ramana does not mix with the weighing machine chap. Or other sidereal romances in the name of spirituality. This indiscriminate mixing is a great handicap. There are such pure and fine and elevating moments in the book to be followed or interfered by the truly banal. This is not to take away the charm of many genuine things you have portrayed. There are a few observations which make a mark. The profound relation between a baby and God for instance! Few sentences do well as to be quotable! Congratulations!

The book raises ideals: Arunachala, Ramana Maharshi, Ramesh Balsekar, Ramakrishna, Buddha and so on. The passion, with which you have painted these, could well kindle healthy curiosity in the readers for these hallowed personages. But you mix these with some foreigners whose authenticity is questionable and indistinct. Though these could have served as interesting props, their elevating in your tale to chief dramatis personae results in an unfortunate and unwarranted dilution of the marvellous candidness with which you set out to explore the world of the spirit. The bona fide is mixed with the stray; this may be the way of the eager beaver but not of a sadhak proper.

There will be some moderns, if a few, who will get interested in spirituality because of your book. You do them a great favour. We hope they will find light on the path to drive their journey to more robust destiny.

The skill with which firmly entrench the characters in their local contexts is noteworthy. Rain in Bombay, locals, wet pavements, dandiya, Salman Khan sans shirt. You are very good at this.

Now let me come to the true appreciation. How did you manage to write such a superbly lucid, astonishingly fluent narrative? Not a single compound sentence! What a triumph! Don't blame it on the Muse in entirety; take some credit for the breakthrough style. It's such an easy read that one does not realize you have finished reading the book. What Gulzar and Sandhu write on the cover bears a true testimony to this.

I also hand it to you for your literary unpretentiousness, your absolute lack of forced erudition of which at least thousand and one writers are a victim. Call it the mark of an excellent story-teller or simplicity of a true genius and accept it graciously. Please stick to this lucidity in all your future endeavors.

Your sense of visual is fantastic. Many descriptions in words are startlingly visual, a gift you can surely work on and enrich. You are not preachy, you are pithy. And it works!

There is something else of good worth in your writing and it is the integrity that consists in safeguarding oneself against pointless elaboration. You practice economy of words with great finesse. It's evident you could have made more pages than hundred and seventy one, but you didn't because you are not dealing in mushrooms like the whole host of ostentatious authors of all times. A Camus or a Hesse alone can practice such precision writing because they are masters; others give in to the accretive mode of verbal annexation, both deliberate and undeliberate. If you can practice the economy you have demonstrated so well in form, also in content, ruthlessly pruning the worthless substance, you shall be a master.