

Book Review of Madhu Wangu's Novel : Immigrant Wife - Her spiritual Journey

A novel is a slice of life past unfolding as a vivid dream.

In Madhu Wangu's novel *Immigrant Wife: Her Spiritual Journey* the past unfolding is that of Shanti Bamzai, who was born and raised in Kashmir, India.

The novel is replete with fine word-mosaics of observations and events. Wangu is quite skilled at that. She uses her painter's skills of raw observation and rounding up of it. The narrative has good flow. Her use of stream-of-consciousness technique is good. The book, overall, is a stream of impressionistic observations, bereft of philosophical inquiries into the nature of reality. Observation is the first step of intellectuality, so every set of observations has to lead to a thought or an idea. She looks at human life as something that happens. She shows little concern for cultural, social, political influences over the development of human personality. She is an existentialist. Her sense of novel's timeline is good. Her characterizations of Shanti's original family members are good, but when it comes to her own family she falters.

The novel's axis lies in the story of Shanti Bamzai. Shanti has a profound urge to draw and paint from her childhood. But because the pursuit of that could take her to socially sensitive situations at her time, her father puts his heavy foot against it. But Shanti defies him ruthlessly and moves forward to join an art school, at the cost of permanently damaging her relationship with him. The novel is set to depict how Shanti progresses in her life in art, or as it turns out later in her life, how she struggles painfully without it.

Madhu Wangu has skillfully narrated Shanti's story but it is not always credible. It is incredible that how Shanti, who is driven by a demonic passion for drawing and painting, for all practical purposes, accepts with *fait accompli* her husband's fierce opposition to it. Shanti defies her father's opposition to it but cowers under her husband's evil scheme against it. This manipulation of Shanti's personality is the greatest flaw of the novel. Shanti picked up her future husband without checking out if he was going to support her immense passion for her art. That is Wangu's major blunder.

As Shanti progresses in her life, without the proper pursuit of her passion, she dwarfs to a mere housewife. From fine arts she goes to culinary arts. According to the author of the novel she is busy pursuing her spiritual journey. The finale of which is the forgiveness of her villainous husband, Satyavan. This tame ending of Shanti's passion for life is dismaying and disturbing. So, Shanti's epic passion for art morphs into pursuit of incipient spirituality. This is ersatz.

Shanti's husband, Satyavan's, character is the most flawed in the book. His talk, behavior, motivations, are artificial. His background of having been picked up from a trash can and latter abandoned by his adopted mother is highly contrived. He has been synthetically created. His nightmare when Shanti leaves him to go for an extended teaching-voyage is highly artificial.

The length of the book, 523 pages, dries out some of its quality. Wangu could have created the same quality of art in 350 pages, with greater comfort for the reader. Shanti's teaching-voyage covers too many pages. More like a travelogue than a spiritual journey that it is intended to be.

The title of the book is a misnomer. There is nothing of substance depicted in the book that is connected to an immigrant's life. The subtitle *Her Spiritual Journey* is not accurate, as Shanti's spiritual yearnings are introduced late in the book, and not in a solid way.

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