

Recent Fiction

THE VENGEANCE AND OTHER STORIES: By Manoj Das; Sterling; Rs. 35.

MANOJ Das is a story teller in the old tradition. There is about him the comfort of a grandmother's lap, the spell of Scheherazade's cliff hangers, the touch of a wandering minstrel who with a few notes of an ancient instrument takes you back into time, or even just the shared joy of sitting around a campfire listening to yarns that flame and flicker with the wind until the next morning, when all that is left behind is a pile of cold ashes.

His style has the light deft touch of an experienced fisherman who can throw his line into any water and be sure of coming up with a catch. Invariably one is hooked by the very first sentence which is often a conversational tit-bit such as, "You are not coming before October are you?" but more commonly a juicy piece of description that plunges you straight into the scene as for instance "Right from the time the season was on the brink of the monsoon

NEVER THE TWAIN: By G. D. Khosla; Vikas; Rs. 60.

"IF only" These two words are the lime and mortar on which are raised the world's greatest love stories. "If only Romeo had trunkcalled before dashing off so precipitously, if only Guinevere had been faithful, or Sita a little less trusting towards strangers. The implication is that perhaps then the world would have spun the other way and humanity would have been saved.

Unfortunately for G. D. Khosla his long drawn out romantic trauma does not pass the lime and mortar test. His hero Krish is such a prig and his heroine Marion such a martyr that one only feels profound relief that they lived up to the prediction of the title.

The tone is confessional. The narrator is looking back on his life and regretting that he did not

SHIFTING SKIES: By Rita Singh Mathur; Vikas; Rs. 60.

THERE are many good things in this collection of short stories — one of them being a cold eyed candour that probes the being of a series of women, most of whom one suspects are close reflections the writer herself.

Strangely enough one is reminded of Doctor describing how he watched his intestines being scanned with a sigmoidoscope. "I was lying there with this thing up you know what" he said, "looking at the inside of my intestines on the screen in front of me. Then the instrument took a snip for testing. I winced but there was no pain, and the thing went on probing as though nothing had happened."

There is the same raw accuracy in the way Ms Mathur describes the life of Rekha, the main heroine in the series. "At nineteen" it is seduction and disappointment at time with the first

the village elders had begun to look grave. The sinister cloud formation on the mountain several miles away, and a wide ring of uncanny aura around the moon had informed them that there were terrible days ahead."

He is at his best in such stories remembered from his childhood in Bengal, when the supernatural throws a ring around the moon and tilts the balance of what is known as reality. But there are also tales in which Das, delicately, very delicately satirizes the actions of men who too have lost their balance, and by a sudden twist of fate, or an attack of commonsense, are allowed to regain it.

The title story *The Vengeance* is about a man Vilas Singh who loses himself through his desire for revenge. He is abruptly brought to his senses by a stroke of fate, that has about it both the supernatural and the ordinary, the unexpected that teaches man what is expected of him.

If at all a question remains it is this: After all the warmth and visions have faded what does one do with the pile of ashes next morning?

have the sagacity or nerve perhaps to marry the one woman who mattered to him all through his life. We then go backward and follow the hero through his early childhood, his youth, his entry into England for further studies, quaint ways of the English, coarse ways of the Indians encountering the English, and so on in a routine that has now been perfected in countless biographies and autobiographies of the ICS generation.

As in all such stories there is an "Enter Marion" scene followed by an "Exit Krish" scene, and there the matter might have ended. But Marion perseveres. Her reunion in India with Krish who has remained celibate through the intervening years forms the high point of the melodrama. The denouement is supposed to be tragic but becomes only tedious, as it serves only to underscore the oft repeated sentiment provided in the title.

lover, then comes a period of humiliation when Rekha has to submit to the indignities of the marriage market, followed by rebellion, marriage and escape. Not for very long though before pregnancy, abortion, and boredom with her marriage, set in. It is perhaps unfair to list these symptoms like the agenda of an agony column, for she writes well and the backdrops are interesting, as hers is a life of travel through South-East Asia and Canada, with occasional sojourns in India. But hers is a visceral view of woman-kind and for all the anguish, a strangely empty one, devoid of any real feeling.

The sky in which Ms. Mathur flies is a lonely one bounded by the confines of herself. In such an atmosphere there is neither up or down, nor right or wrong, only the sound of one pair of wings flapping. The question is why should anyone else listen?

Geeta Doctor