

WHEN one picks up a book by an Indian author written in English about Indian life and background, there is mild apprehension about yet another piece of non-blend of thematic content and language where, even if the description of our tropical landscape comes through, that of the social psyche does not and the names jar. Somehow the impression of a wrong coat being worn remains.

*The Dusky Horizon and other Stories* by Manoj Das is a pleasant exception. The language, one finds, flows easily and takes in its stride the Indianness of the stories: one novelette and 18 short stories.

The author seems to be preoccupied with rural India as it was till a few decades ago, innocent of the vulgarities of modern technology, oblivious of the world outside and secure in the traditional ignorance. When an incident or individual caused a ripple, it was to die down quickly. The author catches this eternal quality very well through most of the stories. Only in a handful does he choose remote suburban towns, or "the farthest west of the metropolis". Indeed, the hub of a metropolis is quite beyond the reach of these stories.

"Where do all the butterflies go

during storm? I wondered in my childhood". Thus begins the first story of the book, setting the mood. The fare is pleasant. The stories do not disturb. Nor do they haunt the reader afterwards. They oscillate between lyrically beautiful and plainly puerile. Sometimes they are funny like the *Bull of Babulpur* or *A Night in the Life of the Mayor*, with no strong satirical intent to impart meaningfulness to these otherwise simple stories. The *General's Grand-Daughter* is insignificant although a tongue-in-cheek description of stern Army discipline is given where officers perform to keep the little girl amused as part of their duty. The rest of the stories are mostly nostalgic, the best being the first from which the book takes its name. In this novelette, the author shows real insight into the adolescent psyche; the dreams and fantasies, the temptations and love of bravado. Next best perhaps are the two stories *The Brothers* and *The Old Man and the Camel*. The author attempts to portray faithfully freedom fighters caught in the transitional point

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of shifting values, and the tragedy that lies in their inability to accept. In some of the stories, the author has toyed with characters one does not meet every day. In *Sunset over the Valley*, *Miss Moberly's Targets* and *Birds at Twilight*, the three central characters are aged people with some psychological quirks in each one. Brij Singh in *Sunset Over the Valley* almost kills himself trying to save a girl he imagines to be his long-lost wife. Miss Moberly is an European inmate of an old people's home. Her pastime in which she takes great pride is her achievement in training pariah dogs to jump for the morsels she throws at them from her balcony. Kumar Tukan Roy in *Birds of Twilight* is the last relic of an old feudal native State with its own share of heroism and pet tigers. There is a distinct exotic flavour in this story that a reader abroad might relish. But while the psychology of Miss

Moberly has been successfully analysed to make the story a success, the other two fall rather flat. Perhaps, the weakest are the two stories that attempt at sentimentalization—*A Letter from the Last Spring* and *Quest of Sunderdas*.

*Lakshmi's Adventure* would have turned out well as an exposition of superstition but for the humorous vein in the conversation, which is totally out of tune. The same is true of *The Naked*, where the abominable servility of office-bearers of a feudal State would have been horrifying but for the humorous treatment that takes the impact out of the horror. This servility is more poignant in *A Crack of Thunder*. But it disturbs by its vague resemblance to a Bengali short story.

That this book leaves a refreshing impression on the mind is due, perhaps, to the indisputable power Das has over the English language. It is, indeed, his forte, and instead of using the familiar imported phrases and idioms, he plays about with the language, picking words

and using them in fresh connotation to build imagery suitable to the Indian background. One cannot resist the temptation of quoting at least this one:

"Over the small valley the sun conducted itself like a newly wed young officer: it went home as soon as it struck four."

"Brij Singh often felt jealous of the banian tree atop the hill behind which the sun disappeared. The tree hid the sun, but basked in the sun's golden beams and looked pompous and puffed up. Brij Singh felt as if it misappropriated the warmth he needed so badly".

With a few masterly strokes of the brush, the author can draw vivid pictures. A good example is the signs of progress in an Indian village or the workings of the mind as Miss Moberly analyses a situation. Examples like this abound but they stop to delight after a while if the main story lines are weak.

The total get-up of the book is good. The print is clear and errors are few. But these also could have been avoided with a little more care in a laser typeset.

**The Dusky Horizon And Other Stories.** By Manoj Das. (B. R. Publishing.)

