

Fiction as allegory of the present

A Tiger at Twilight by Manoj Das. Penguin, New Delhi. Pp. 132. Rs 65.

ALLEGORY

REVIEWING "A Tiger at Twilight", I am reminded of a story when a teacher of journalism asked his students to do an anecdote with divinity, royalty, sex and suspense as ingredients. The winning entry was: "O' God! cried the King. The queen is pregnant. Whodunit?." This novelette by Manoj Das, besides the above ingredients, has human sacrifice, adventure, supernatural forces, female vanity and an innocent Brahmin falling prey to it, plight of the princes after the raj and the subjects still in awe of their Raja and the inevitable "they lived happily ever after" ending.

"But the sudden return of Samargarh's Raja to his ancestral state revives memories of an old injustice and rekindles questions that have remained unasked for years: what is the cause of the mysterious ailment that grips the raja's beautiful daughter? Is the cold, ruthless Heera the raja's stepsister or his mistress and what is the hold she has on him? Why does the raja walk the streets of Nijanpur in the dead of night? ... and then there is a terrifying new development: a man-eating tiger begins killing the defenceless peasantry in the area. The raja undertakes to kill the beast and the stage is set for an eerie, nerve-shattering encounter in the twilight forest of Nijanpur where the evil from the past is finally put to rest."

And as willed by the raja at the time of his death, his beautiful princess's hand is offered to the hero, belonging to a royal clan at one time opposed to Samargarh.

Heera, the stepsister of the raja is as enigmatic a character as is her relationship with him, which is "rather intriguing".

"I will marry you to a real prince charming," Heera's king-father(?) used to tell her. The young raja had taken it upon himself to fulfil his father's promise. But the pity was that Heera found those who came to court her anything but charming she would humiliate them the moment she started to feel bored in their company. And finally the raja found a prince who offered his beautiful sister's hand to him and the raja "consented to marry her with a tacit understanding that the prince would marry Heera."

The raja married the prince's sister but "the prospective bridegroom grew increasingly cool and shy." And the inevitable happened on the wedding day itself, when the prince committed suicide. Apparently jilted and cheated, Heera appeared to take it well She threatened to shoot herself if the raja called off the dinner party scheduled to take place after the wedding ... she found great amusement in announcing the death of her prince husband to the guests. The more awkward they felt, the greater seemed to be her amusement. That of course was only a facade."

Heera could not tolerate her dead fiance's

sister, the rani becoming a mother. The rani had to swallow all the poison Heera spat in every word she uttered. And Heera moved out of the palace to become the reigning queen of a circle of lazy aristocrats, snobs and the extravagantly wealthy. This went on for five years and when the rani died, Heera was back with the raja, took charge of princess Balika and developed a frenzied attachment with her.

Dev, the hero, in his school-days had a teacher in Sharmaji who is asked by Heera to teach her Sanskrit, a job which he takes up tickled by Heera's blandishments which were not at all for him. She had some tokens of her prince charming who was physically dead but psychologically alive in her, but only to be made a proxy of someone who could fall prey to Heera's designs to wreak vengeance on the male sex.

"Once she persuaded a millionaire buffoon to shave his head ... so that her prince's hat could fit it. Another time she obliged a fellow, a vainglorious sycophant, to put on the pair of shoes I had got made for her would-be husband ... She has just been doing the same thing with poor Sharma."

Then the raja, more out of pride, narrates a story when one of his forefathers took along a poet to the forest and deserted him there, only to ask him the following morning, to write a poem about his experience in the jungle. The raja laughs: "But I doubt if the poet wrote any poetry at all in his life after the experience." Such a sadistic streak in the royal clan explains the agony of Balika, the young princess.

All these years Balika had suffered the agonies of "possession" of her by Heera, the poor princess's mother had died unable to bear the reproach of Heera herself. Now she talks only to Vimla, an old lady in attendance on her who had also served the palace of Dev, the hero, as a nurse. Dev does provide her some respite from Heera occasionally.

The raja finds the man-eating tigress face to face with Heera; Dev who had accompanied the raja fires a shot at the tigress killing the animal, but Heera had by then been mauled by the beast. The raja also is later taken seriously ill, and while dying bequeathes his castle and Balika to Dev. The hero then is hopeful: "if she (Balika) can walk up there, she will surely be able to walk further," of course to become his life-partner.

The novel by Manoj Das opens with a gory description when incidents have been related to familiarise the reader with the practice of human sacrifice in the royal clan. This was done to please the deity and when seven sons of the erstwhile king died in quick succession, the eighth was sacrificed on the advice of the priest to save the ninth. Later, their successors adopted children to be so sacrificed. The raja, a protagonist of this novel, occasionally plunges into a lake near the castle in an apparent bid to stumble on to some hidden treasure; a belief had gone round that the deity helped the clan in any financial crisis. This raja of Samargarh also chances upon a discovery but the chest contained nothing but "a human skeleton, now lying crumbled amidst clods of mud that had penetrated the chest".

The author gives interesting details of the post-Raj period when democracy, and more appropriately, freedom, was ushered in the peoples' psyche, somewhat inhibited and reluctant.

TRIBUNE 18/4/92 Rajbir Deswal