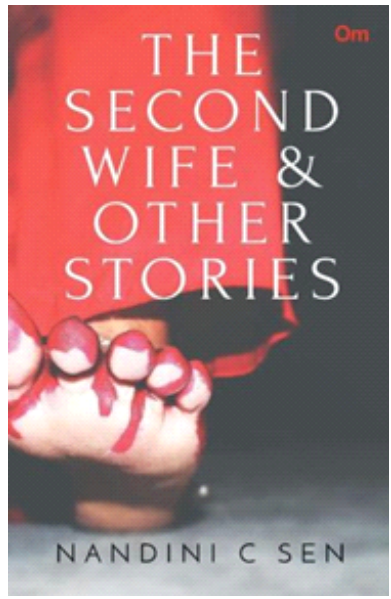
Book Review

Nandini C. Sen. *The Second Wife & Other Stories.* New Delhi: Om Books International, 2022, pp. 184, PB, Price: US $ 8.99, ISBN: 978-93-91258-955.

Reviewed by
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The Second Wife & Other Stories (2022) is an anthology of eleven short stories. This is the first fictional offering from academician Nandini Sen. For an author whose academic writings are marked by discipline and theoretical rigour, her creative work is written with remarkable lucidity, economy of words and clarity of expression. But a common denominator which runs through both her fictional and non-fictional works is an abiding preoccupation with the condition of women. The author renders full justice to her new role as a raconteur offering glimpses into the lives of myriad women-wives, daughters, mothers, professionals, mythic women and those living a deprived life on the margins. The stories provide vivid details of the everyday, quotidian lives of women caught in domestic drudgery, trapped in infelicitous marriage or simply finding their aspirations stymied by a society ruled by patriarchal dictates. But the stories are also about their quiet assertion, new beginnings and about the suppressed finding a vocation, meaning and true calling in life. The epigraph, a quote from the African politician Thomas Sankara, an advocate of women's causes: "I can hear the roar of women's silence" sets the tone of the collection and encapsulates the intent of the volume, which the author acknowledges is to "explore 'herstories' in a patriarchal set up" (183).

The stories straddle different geographies and a spatial time span. They are set in very recognisable, familiar surroundings of India- mofussil towns, thriving metropolises, the Naxal-dominated hinterland, the pre-independence Bengal in the throes of nationalist fervour, with an occasional foray into a London apartment or a Dubai complex. The stories revolve wholly around women and are narrated through

their point of view. With the exception of the inaugural, "The Sapphire Ring" and the fantastical "Queen Kaikeyi", recounted by male narrators suffering from feelings of guilt and betrayal, all the other stories whether using first person narration or omniscient, are told entirely through the women's perspective. The world of the stories is peopled with variegated but identifiable characters-from a mother reluctant to accept her son's sexual orientation, to women realising their hitherto dormant potential, to broken women resolving to pick up the fragmented pieces of their lives and moving on. The wide-ranging subject matter deals with problems endemic to society both urban and rural, such as girl's education, sexual exploitation, infidelity, unwanted pregnancies and domestic abuse. The collection is an eclectic mix of stories, few end on a promising note, some offer a feeble ray of light while others are dark and unrelenting, even resulting in self-annihilation. The first two bone-chilling stories contribute to an ominous sense of foreboding which looms large over the rest, and with every turn of the page the reader waits with bated breath for something sinister to happen. Perhaps the intriguing and ambiguous cover of the novel, in dominant and disturbing red, works subliminally to this end as well.

The non-linear narration of the first two stories builds towards the accretion of these breath-holding suspenseful moments. If Nabonita's story were told chronologically, it wouldn't have had the desired impact of poetic justice. The mysterious opening paragraph flashes forward to the climactic end, with a description of Nabonita stealing an unnamed object from the kitchen and concealing it in her raiment: "The mere thought sent a chill up her spine. She could feel its sharp edge against her body as she pictured herself carrying it to her bed" (19). Similarly, in the expository scene of "The Sapphire Ring", when the girlfriend of the ageing author-narrator persuades him to write about the Naxalbari movement of his college days, his discomfiture and evasiveness suggest that he is trapped in a phantasmagorical past. What unfolds is a tale of love, lust, guilt and betrayal. But there are a few exceptions like "Laila" where Sen mockingly subverts the reader's expectations of a terrible outcome. At the anti-climactic end of the story the author playfully manages to pull the rug from under the reader's feet, as it were, especially when the reader by this time has become so heavily predisposed to expecting the worst.

Many of these women-centric stories, including the eponymous "The Second Wife" are about women at the cusp of asserting their identity and coming into their own despite all odds. Set against the backdrop of the Indian national movement for independence, "The Second Wife" has the canvas of a novella. It succinctly deals with most of the themes interspersed across other stories such as circumscribed domestic lives of women, suspicion surrounding girl's education, asymmetrical marital relations and an incremental desire in women to break free of all shackles. It is a marvel that the writer packs in so many tropes into this story. One is compelled to compare Sen's handling of the short-story format to what critics say about writer

Katherine Mansfield's treatment of the genre-that in her hand it becomes perfectly amenable to exploring the feminine consciousness and feminist worldview. This is equally applicable to Sen's handling of the medium. The growth arc that Sen gives to her protagonist Bela is remarkable. From her tomboyish childhood to book-loving adolescence to the moniker she earns in the Dutta household, Bela remains fiercely independent; which is reflected in her exercising control over her reproductive system, her steely resolve to embrace non-materialism and in her determined political action. Her desire for unfettered freedom is coterminous with the nation's and the clarion call for freedom rending the streets of Calcutta resounds in her inner being. Both attain it.

Ultimately all the stories in the anthology are about women breaking free, about self-realisation and self-discovery. For some their action may mark baby steps towards freedom, like "The Performer", "whose troubles were far from over, but for a change, she was battle ready" (55). Or when the disadvantaged Jyotsna, suffering from triple marginalisation of class, caste and gender realises that "The only way she would ever be free would be if she fought her own battle. There was no turning back now." (154) Nabonita has had to contend with fractured identity all of her young life- she is lovingly called 'Nabo' in her native tongue which gets anglicised to 'Nita' in her English-medium school and then she shamefully has the objectified epithet 'Bonny' thrust upon her. But she manages to integrate these pieces even as she sets out on an uncharted path unassisted, directionless, "on the cobbled streets of the unfamiliar city" (40). It goes to the credit of the writer that she describes these life-altering moments in clear, lucid prose, eschewing the ornamental flourishes. The lucidity and directness of style stand out during these climactic moments of epiphany: "Laila…felt happy in the presence of two people she loved the most. She knew this was a fleeting moment and tomorrow she might not feel the same. But tomorrow was another day and she would face it, chin up. Today was what mattered." (92) In a marvellous turn of phrase, the mother in 'Lipstick' "finally dared to come out of the closet" (68), shedding years of outmoded ideas and beliefs. For example, the end of "Happy Times" which brings about a startling but pleasant realisation to the reader and protagonist alike, that the secret to mental peace and equanimity is quite simple: "Aisha felt a strange kind of happiness…She settled on her drawing room sofa, covered herself with a quilt. That night, she took the landline off the hook and also remembered to put her mobile phone on silent mode." (130) Stories are interspersed with aphorisms as "Life is an exam with an unknown syllabus" (77), "We tend to co-habit with our past" (7).

The anthology is rich and varied but I must confess to a personal favourite- the complex and multi-layered "Queen Kaikeyi". I would love to privilege this absolutely masterful reworking of an epic tale. This short story subsumes within it the wide

arc of the familiar story of the much reviled queen of the *Ramayana* who set the epic on its tragic trajectory. It offers an interesting spin to Kaikeyi's reason for sending Rama into exile; according a higher purpose to her action than the sages would allow her. Fully aware that she was destined to set the cosmic chain of events in motion she is willing to take on the world's opprobrium for all times to come. She confides her real motives to Rishi Matanga but he keeps the secret to himself, fearing the world's judgement, even though he has unconditionally loved her: "There would be the usual questions and muckraking. Even a Maharishi like me would not be spared" (166). His deference to public censure contrasts her courage and there is no absolution for him. In choosing to remain silent he also becomes representative of all men who fail to rise to occasion in defence of women. But the silent love of Matanga, and Kaikeyi's awareness of it, has spawned some tender moments of fellowship in the story. The palpable physical tension he feels for the unattainable Queen, the difference in social hierarchy which would forbid any fructification of such a relationship is reminiscent of Karna's unspoken love of Draupadi in that other retelling of the epic, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Sen's story contains too many possibilities to be explored further and perhaps here lie the germ and kernel of an unborn novel that we should expect next from the debutant writer.

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