

Basavraj Naikar, *Light in the House*. Bangalore: CVG Books, 2006. 136pp. ISBN 81-8343-005-8.

Basavraj Naikar wears many hats: he is a professional academic, a creative writer in both English and Kannada, the native language of the state of Karnataka in India, a critic and a prolific book reviewer as well as a translator. He has written historical novels and done extensive and engaging research in Shakespeare studies and Commonwealth literature. He stands out prominently among the campus-based creative writers in English like Shiv K. Kumar, Makarand Paranjape, and Sanjukta Dasgupta. Naikar's trademark as a producer of fiction has been collection of stories about the ways in which the greatness of sages and mystical mentors has been revealed. Predictably, these narratives are fuelled by regional historical material and characterised by realism, regionalism, and Indian sensibility as we see in *The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories* (2000) and *The Rebellious Rani of Belavadi and Other Stories* (2001). Almost all his novels have a fairly rich cast of rural and religious characters drawn from the dry northern regions of the State of Karnataka. Evidently, portrayal of the religious life of saints is Naikar's forte. This characteristic strength sustains *Light in the House* too. It is "a hagiographic novel," as the Foreword declares, "about Sri Sharif Saheb of Shisunala, who is an example of spiritual light operating in a human body."

The title of Naikar's book metaphorically suggests spiritual illumination in corporeal house, which means, the life of a person. Sharif was the store-house of homespun wisdom and accessible to common people. The regional and local impact of the saint-poet's message gets lifted for a wider dissemination in English. The overt religiosity of the writer is evident in this fictional account of Sharif. As the author himself notes in the Preface, he has presented "the interesting life of Sharif Saheb, the great spiritual songster in the form of a novel for the benefit of non-Kannada readers in order to inspire them to go back to his songs and philosophy...." The saint who is popularly known as the Kabir of Karnataka is the mainstay of the novel's narrative trajectory. With hagiographic motifs and pious material the book purports to be a fictionalised biography. While portraying a pietist sage, it idealises the saint protagonist and so it comes close to being a hagiographic piece of fiction.

The saint-poet, Sharif Saheb (1819-89), lived in the nineteenth century Karnataka, a state in southern India. A disciple of Sri Govindbhatta, Sharif was immensely influenced by the non-dualist philosophy of a great Virasaiva saint, Prabhudeva. Naikar has collected substantial factual details about the popular spiritual luminary from diverse sources. Though steeped in penury and deprivation, Sharif remained dedicated to spirituality all along his life. A non-conformist and plain humanist, he showed no inclination or adherence towards any institutionalised creed. He emerges in the narrative as a tenacious and practicing upholder of the essential unity of all religions as well as gifted with occult powers like clairvoyance and prophesying. Well-sourced details of Sharif's life, the context of his upbringing, and the social milieu provide vital links, but primarily as a rhetorical rather than novelistic topos. However, some stratum of fiction does accompany Naikar's treatment of Sharif.

The protagonist's parents, Hajarat Imam Saheb and Hajjuma, are palpably located in history. Their ordinary daily life and occupation, their routine chores and motivations are firmly anchored in the normal round of their everyday activities. Their pious, contented life wedded to a composite religious tradition is underlined without any obtrusive suggestion. Their desire and anxiety to have a child are built into the context of their life as normal, credible human aspiration. So is the fulfilment of their wish. They visit the shrine of Hajaresha Khadari and their faith in divine intervention is vindicated. Their son born on page 14 in the first section of the book is named Mohammad Sharif. He grows up from an inquisitive and precocious child into a kind and decent adult. He is conspicuously clever, outspoken and strong-willed as well as exceptionally virtuous and frank enough to fly in the face of conventional beliefs and religious bigotry. Like his generous and broadminded father, he imbibes the ideals and teachings of both Hinduism and Islam, and exudes the holiness of heart inspired by the affirming flame of indivisible divinity.

Naikar taps into folk memory, local legends, stories and regional works on the life and teachings of the saint to cull out telling details about the hero of his hagiography. He recounts many miracles performed by Sharif and interweaves telltale episodes of the saint's magnanimity and politeness with his popular acceptance as an inspiring mystic. The saint is also presented as a tolerant, secular and down-to-earth spiritual personality among the feudal, communal and narrow-minded elements of the Kannada society of his time. However, as one reaches the final page of Naikar's book, one is confronted with the question: does the book have admittedly characteristic appearances of a novel? The plot at least does not suggest it. The author's respect and reverence for Sharif leaps out of the print and the narrative reads like a worshipful biography congruous with the tenets of aretology except that the spiritual protagonist's attributes are not listed in the first-person. The protagonist's portrayal, though not overly sacred, is evidently embellished in that the presentation of the saint's life and activities seems to be the author's main offering or preponderant preoccupation instead of a structured, inter-related narrative of his religious journey.

Finally, there is a generic confusion as one evaluates this book as a piece of fiction. It is neither a biography nor a historical fiction. Naikar's account of Sharif's life and activities enriches the reader's understanding of the saint-poet as it is not a fanciful invention with passing regard to the historical facts. Naikar dramatises events, creates convincing dialogue and scenes to make the chronicle of Sharif's deeds engaging and real. It is a fictionalised treatment of Sharif's life to the extent that the narrative is built around the incidents of his life. However, the biographical intent suffused with stylised hagiographic flavour shows up, undermining the plot dynamics and other essential novelistic features.

Murari Prasad
B.N. Mandal University, Madhepura, India

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