

**Anjali Venugopal, *Kora*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2013. 248 pp. ISBN 978-93-5045-049-9.**

Anjali Venugopal is a writer of Indian descent who is now settled in Malaysia. *Kora* is Venugopal's second novel (2013). Her debut novel is *The River Has No Camera* (2000). As a writer, she has attempted to find "her own voice" since the publication of her first novel, which is considered to be an "experimental" work (Venugopal 4). In "The Author" section of the novel, *Kora*, it is mentioned that Venugopal loves watching movies, and this has in many ways impacted on the style of her writing: "An avid enthusiast of the movies, she tries to make her writing as 'filmic' as she can" (Venugopal 4). The 'filmic' quality in Venugopal's narrative is evident in the first chapter of the novel, which is set in Tibet, and where the emphasis is on the visuality of the images: "White swans filled the Lake. They were everywhere – swimming in the icy cold water, drying their feathers in the feeble sunshine or flying overhead, providing a bold yet pleasing contrast to the blue waters below them and the black ravens above" (Venugopal 12). This aspect is also evident in the chapter titles of the novel which are placed under the heading "Timeline." This suggests that time is an important factor in the narrative. In fact, the titles of the chapters – "Tibet, 1995," "New York, Some Months Later," "New Dehi, 1989," "Mumbai, 1995" – appear to be like different shots of a filmic narrative set in different locations. Hence, the act of reading the novel produces an impression in the readers that they are, as if, watching a film.

Venugopal's *Kora* narrativises the journey of the protagonist, Tamra, who is burdened with a guilt. It is this guilt which initially distances her from her homeland, but later she returns to the same homeland to seek redemption. At the centre of the novel lies the issue of "return": whether or not to return to the home space is a vital question for the protagonist. The trace of a guilt keeps Tamra restless throughout her sojourn of life. It is similar to Amir's sense of repentance in Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*. He returns to Afghanistan, boiling in violence then, running the risk of his life, to rescue the son of his childhood friend and step-brother, Hassan. He had done a great injustice to Hassan in the past. It is a redemptive journey, a kind of a pilgrimage. In *Kora* too (the word carries a sense of pilgrimage) Tamra's journey is a kind of "pilgrimage" which must be performed to redeem her disturbed soul. Tibet offers an excellent spatiality for meditation and redemption. A place tugged in the Himalayas, Tibet is the abode of peace and Buddhist philosophy. Steeped in Buddhist spiritualism, the word "Kora" is a very appropriate concept applied to the protagonist's journey. The first chapter of the novel, titled "Tibet, 1995," seeks to emphasise the importance of pilgrimage in Tamra's life. Though Tamra comes to Tibet for spending a holiday, the place actually offers her a meditative

atmosphere: “It was as though she was frozen – lost in some distant memory, in some other dimension of time and space” (Venugopal 11). The magnificence of the Kailash Mountain, the beauty of the Manasarovar lake and the innocent white swans flying overhead, create a spiritual space for Tamra, which makes her feel the necessity of “spiritual accomplishment” (Venugopal 12). This spiritual accomplishment will be possible only when Tamra goes on a pilgrimage. The idea of pilgrimage is, therefore, very significant in the opening chapter of *Kora*. The pilgrims coming to the Kailash Mountain travel in a circular pattern around the Kailash to offer their prayers to Shiva and this circular journey around the Shiva purges the sins of human life. “Kora,” as Venugopal suggests, is this circular journey around the Kailash, and this has a symbolic dimension in Tamra’s life too. While understanding the hurdles involved in completing one round of the Kailash, Tamra feels the necessity of purging her sinful soul by doing the Kora: “As the dew on a rose disappears in the first rays of the morning sun, so do our sins by a mere glimpse of Kailash. Imagine what the Inner Kora can do to the demons that reside within us all” (Venugopal 11).

Tamra’s Tibetan experience is followed by her life in New York where she is busy in establishing a publishing house. Her dynamic life in New York is intercepted by a letter that comes from Tankerville, a place in Mumbai, where she had lived before arriving in New York. This letter which is written by Indra Aunty – mother of her childhood friend Jaggi – reminds Tamra of an incident that occurred years ago near the Pavilion theatre in Mumbai. In the letter, Indra expresses her wish to talk to her regarding the incident. In fact, the letter takes Tamra down memory lane as she recalls how her car had hit Maya – Jaggi’s beloved – and without stopping the car to save Maya from dying, she fled away from the scene of accident. This incident is the actual turning point in Tamra’s life. The guilt that she did not stop the car to help Maya, creates a crisis in her life and very soon she leaves Mumbai to find a job in New York. Tamra’s decision to escape from the guilt does not relieve her from the pain and suffering of guilt as she is constantly haunted by the past sin. So, when she comes back to Mumbai after receiving the letter of Indra, she actually decides to atone for the sin. Tamra’s attempt to find in Jaggi a good life partner and thereby fill the void in Jaggi’s life that had been created after Maya’s death, is symbolic of pilgrimage, a journey that redeems the sin of her past life. She not only fills the emotional vacuum in Jaggi’s life, but also assists him to become a good theatre actor. In fact, Jaggi’s success comes at the cost of Tamra’s sacrificing a bright career prospect in New York. At the end of the novel, when Jaggi attains the peak of success by becoming one of the renowned film-makers in Bollywood, it is then, that we realise the significance of “Kora” in Tamra’s life. Thus, from a thematic perspective, the novel has three interconnected motifs: guilt, redemption and pilgrimage.

The motif of pilgrimage, which centres on Tamra's journey, can be read from the perspective of diaspora. Tamra is a diasporic character, and it is because of doing the "Kora" that she ultimately settles in Mumbai. Before Tamra's final settlement in Mumbai, she is caught in-between two opposite forces: one is her wish to connect with the roots by living in Tankerville, and the other, is her desire to go back to New York to resume her work on establishing a publishing house. This dilemma is very effectively captured by Venugopal in the following lines:

Why was the thought of leaving in the morning so unbearable? Almost a decade ago she had walked away. From Jaggi, from Tankerville. From everything. But what does one do when one walks away and away and away – only to look back and find that one has not really moved at all? In that instant Tamra wished that she had not looked back. Why *did Indra Auntie have to send her that cursed letter?* (189; emphasis original)

As a diasporan, there is the strong sense of connection with the roots that overpowers Tamra's mind and this fixes her to Tankerville. This tendency in a diasporan has been very well explained by Peter van der Veer: "the theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left" (qtd. in Paranjape 82). Paranjape refers to van der Veer in his essay "Triple Ambivalence: Australia, Canada and South Asia in the Diasporic Imagination" to substantiate the fact that "the sense of rootedness" in a diasporan is needed for affirming the Indianness inherent in a diasporic self (Paranjape 83). A diasporan, before migrating to a foreign land, may not realise this Indianness, but in a diasporic space this Indianness becomes more prominent (Paranjape 83).

Apart from the motif of pilgrimage, *Kora* offers a critical stance on Nehruvian policies. The anti-Nehru sentiment is strong in Jaggi and his father, Nana. There are certain sections in the novel where political debates related to Nehru's attitude to India and the neighbouring countries are foregrounded. Jaggi believes that Nehru is responsible for the Indo-China war of 1962, and he also feels that the Panchsheel treaty, which was the brainchild of Nehru, was just an eyewash. Jaggi's anti-Nehru stance has its roots in the life of his father, Nana who fought against the Chinese in 1962. His father fought a tough battle against the Chinese at Chushul where he lost many friends of his troop. In the war Nana was seriously injured but more than the physical injury it was the loss of his friends which made him depressed afterwards. After the experience of war, Nana could not socialise with the people of Tankerville and in the later years of his life, Nana leaves Tankerville to dwell peacefully in Tibet with the Buddhist monks. Nana, like his son, is also critical of Nehru's policies. The

discontent in Jaggi and Nana regarding Nehru's dealing with China expresses their concern for national borders and it also reflects the fact that border conflicts are purely the outcome of poor leadership. If Nehru had not offered shelter to Dalai Lama, then, according to Nana, the relationship between China and India would not have worsened. The 1962 Indo-China war occurred, according to Nana and Jaggi, due to Nehru's callous foreign policies and Panchsheel treaty is one of those. Venugopal has, thus, brilliantly used these two characters to critique the tendency of some historians to idolise Nehru. In fact, Venugopal seems to be very much against the popular practice of deifying national leaders in India.

On the whole, *Kora* is a multilayered text involving issues related to diaspora, nation and memory. The wonderful juxtaposition of the events of the past and the present shows Venugopal's skill as a writer who has carefully knitted the story to give the readers a well structured narrative. The narrative is highly captivating as it mixes all the ingredients needed to keep the readers' interest alive. *Kora* has all the elements to fascinate the researchers working on the field of Indian English literature as it provides new insights into the issues of history, politics and border conflicts.

### **Works Cited**

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