

Review of 'Raise the Lanterns High'

by Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie,

Address given at the launch of the novel, 2nd December, 2004,

Learning Resource Centre, University of the West Indies.

Novelists, and indeed artists of every kind, who paint for us, their version of the world and create the people, events and circumstances which they consider important, tell us as much through what they portray and emphasize and focus upon as they do through what is invisible, silent or hidden in the sub text or the subconscious. That is what renders art complex and that is what makes any good work of art multi dimensional in character.

And so in this novel, *Raise the Lanterns High* by Lakshmi Persaud, we have a work of art which speaks to us on many levels and through several frequencies. How can a reader ignore the fact that while in the eighteenth century suttee, the practice of having a widow accompany her dead husband on the funeral pyre so that they could be united in death, was a reality of cultural life in parts of Northern India, Europe was caught up in the enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason because of its celebration of the powers of human reason, a keen interest in science, the promotion of religious tolerance and its respect for individual freedom and freedom of thought?

And how can we not acknowledge that examining an arranged marriage in the context of the 1960's when the second world war was over, decolonization had been set in motion, independence of new, formerly colonial countries was in the air, and the world of opportunity through education was opening up for both men and women, but especially for women – how can we not acknowledge that this topic was chosen as an area of focus precisely because the juxtaposition of rational, free choice and conformity to tradition makes the dilemma sharper and more poignant.

And what could connect these two events: a flight by three women to avoid submission to the funeral pyre and a battle within one woman to follow her mind, heart and spirit on the one hand and to conform to family and societal expectations on the other? Well, the Hindu tradition is what connects them. The Hindu tradition is what connects India and Trinidad where the main body of the story is set and this connection between Trinidad and India through the Hindu tradition is facilitated by the indentureship system which allowed so many Indians to journey to far off lands in order to make another life.

At the center of the story, therefore, is an examination of Hindu tradition, culture and practice in the modern world and a plea for rationality while acknowledging the beauty and sophistication of aspects of Hindu culture and civilization that are of such immense value to those within the fold: the food, the ceremonies, the music and dance, the cosmic sense of God, the creativity, the philosophical depth, the literary and sacred texts.

This novel will find a ready audience in India and across the diaspora wherever Indians have settled in the world whether through indenture in the nineteenth century or later migrations during the twentieth. This is a book which celebrates, explores and questions Indian civilization. This is a book which speaks to the uneasiness of the young Hindu growing up in the midst of Western civilization.

This is also a book about Indian women wrestling to come to terms with tradition and modernity. The women are educated women, who have seen the world, and who have been influenced by western

education, thought and civilization and the dilemma for them is what does one retain, what do you throw out altogether because it defies rationality and good sense, and what can be carried forward with some modification and transformation as a source of comfort. These are fundamental challenges for any traditional culture in the modern age but Lakshmi Persaud, writing about what she knows well, is concerned with Hindu culture and its traditions and the author is able to create characters who speak from within the tradition and so fundamentally what is being asked here by the narrator as well as characters is how does one gain the world without losing one's soul. This makes *Raise the Lanterns High* at once an intellectually stimulating novel as well as a moving story of individual choice within the framework of a need for communal identity and a wholeness beyond what individuality, on its own, can offer.

This is also a woman's book, presenting the woman's perspective in a world in which all the rules are made by men. But this is not a book about victims and victimizers. It is about strong women who anchor family, culture and community, who are educated and enlightened; who are thought leaders in their respective domains; and who would be leaders in any environment or context but who lack the power to make things happen the way they want it or even to live their lives as they would prefer and who do not even enjoy the basic right of freedom of choice.

Lakshmi Persaud has published three novels before this one. *Butterfly in the Wind* was about a young girl growing up in Tunapuna and is essentially a book about childhood, discovery and growth in consciousness. *Sastra* is a novel which so moved me that I wrote a review of it in the *Trinidad and Tobago Review* some years ago. And I thought that both of these novels spoke so well to issues that had never been attended to before, that when I was asked to speak at a graduation ceremony for students at Lakshmi Girls' College earlier this year, I recommended both books to the school. I think they have now added them to their reading list.

For the Love of My Name is Lakshmi Persaud's third novel and it makes a significant departure from the earlier works. It fictionalizes the Burnham years in Guyana drawing on historical events to tell a story of megalomania and brutality while regional Caribbean society, its governments and institutions go about their business in a conspiracy of silent consent.

That third novel was striking both for the boldness of its theme as well as its experimentation with form. In this last novel, too, *Raise the Lanterns High* there is some experimentation with form, as time and place are explored without boundaries, through the conscious of the protagonist Vasti Nadir.

Two stories are juxtaposed and intricately woven into a novel of three parts, forty chapters and an epilogue.

Part one of the novel is the story of Vasti Nadir, a recent University graduate for whom arrangements are being made to marry Karan Walli, a young doctor from a well-known, respected family. All is well until Vasti realizes to her horror that the man she is about to marry is the very person whom she witnessed raping one of her school mates in a cane field on her way home from school one day in 1955. Faced with the dilemma of going through with the marriage or calling it off, Vasti becomes drastically ill and in this state of high fever she drifts to a far off time in a far off land where three queens are being prepared for suttee because their husband, the King is dead. Vasti is facing her dilemma in the 1960's in a village in Trinidad. The three queens Meena, Dayita and Renu are wrestling with theirs in Jyotica in Northern India. What connects these two places and stories is the indentureship system which made it possible for Vasti's grandfather to buy an old mirror which had been transported from India to Trinidad from a rundown warehouse in Port-of-Spain. When the mirror was bought a handwritten note was attached to the mirror.

“This mirror comes from one of the Northern semi-arid Kingdoms of India. It belonged to a Queen who fled from performing suttee on the King’s pyre, though this was her duty; she was bound by honour and loyalty so to do. When the new King was crowned, his favourite Queen sold everything this rebellious widowed Queen had left behind, convinced that it had become sullied by association. The new Queen did not wish to harbour the personal belongings of a renegade, for to have kept it in the palace, meant honouring her memory.”

“So it had traveled across oceans, when journeys were long and perilous”, the writer tells us. So it is this mirror which allowed Vasti “to experience other perceptions of life which enabled her to have an imaginative understanding of life beyond her experience. Thus with the message of the mirror written in her memory and the fever going to her head Vasti is able to connect us with an ancient world and we as readers are able to juxtapose those two worlds and place them in context as well as assess them in continuity.

How do the stories end? The eighteenth century story ends with the Queens escaping from the Palace and refusing to surrender to suttee. In the more contemporary story in Trinidad, Vasti decides to go ahead with marriage, she changes the marriage vows so that they are more appropriate in a modern context and she is prepared to do what is required to prepare the road for the next generation of daughters. She forgives the transgression of her husband-to-be and meets the expectations of both families.

And how does the author justify this? By framing a world of continuity and change. Change is necessary and must be led, but continuity is important and cannot be ignored, must not be undermined. A certain wisdom is needed to maintain the continuity and effect the required change at the same time.

Raise the Lanterns High is a complex book. It asks some simple basic questions about being a human being. Who are we really? Why don’t we do always what is reasonable and sensible? Why are we not kind and good and decent to one another? Why do we make rules and set up structures and systems and traditions that make no sense and does no one any good? Why are we unkind and cruel to one another? Why do we do things and engage in behaviours that defy rationality?

I think the message of the novel is that there is no such thing as a perfect world and that one has to have a frame of reference for functioning constructively in an imperfect world. The challenge is not who is the enemy? Or how to make the world perfect, but how to live and serve others and find happiness and purposefulness in an imperfect world. The challenge is how to make the world more reasonable and less imperfect; how to make a better world for others even if one has to sacrifice oneself.

As the novel ends one of the characters reflects: “there are those who willingly sacrifice themselves and join the others”.

And this notion of the many who sacrificed before us is strong in the sensibility of Lakshmi Persaud’s characters.

In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar the protagonist says “conscience makes cowards of us all”. One might reinterpret that in a different context by saying it is so hard to do the right thing when you do not want to do the right thing precisely because that will lead to the destruction of everything else. And that is Vasti’s dilemma, what does one do, if what one should do, will lead to the destruction of everything else. Vasti is compromising by making a personal sacrifice in favour of family and community.

Much of the book focuses on men who exploit power, position and circumstance to take advantage of women, from dance instructors to pundits. But there are good men too, who are enlightened, who nurture a progressive culture in the home, who liberate and educate their daughters, so that a woman like Lakshmi Persaud can write eloquent and moving novels such as *Raise the Lanterns High*.

2nd December 2004.