

place as a 'self-assured settler'. Still the happenings in his homeland continued attracting his attention with great intensity. The last collection of his short stories, published in his lifetime in 1990, accentuated his mood of disillusionment and despair. The story *Shan-e-Punjab*, that gave this collection its title, was in a way his swan song.

Rana Nayar has selected, in *Melting Moments*, 14 stories of Raghbir Dhand for translation into English. He has selected only such stories as have the location of, not India, but England. The reason being that Dhand had spent almost twenty five years of his creative life there. While commenting on these stories, Nirupama Dutt has observed, "As a writer, Dhand was known to use language with the deftness of a painter's strokes and the achievement of this volume is that the translator is able to retain this ability in the English language, which is a very difficult task indeed. This volume is important not just because it is the first ever attempt to showcase Dhand's work in English but because it has been done so well with an insightful introduction putting each story in a perspective." The guiding principle behind the selection of the stories seems to be the problem of dual cultural identity.

Snowbound in London presents the perfect scenario in this context. Channo is a working woman, mostly travelling in the bus. Once she is caught up in snowstorm that leaves her stranded on the road. While waiting for the bus, she recalls how her husband saved her from the four Englishmen who tried to misbehave with her. That conduct of their's was due to the racial tension in the city. Sandhak gave sound beating to two

of them but the others wounded him badly. The incident gave her husband swollen eyes while two of his teeth were knocked out. Recalling the incident, Channo exclaims, "You accursed white men, may you burn in the fires of hell!" Before long, the bus arrives and she reaches home safely. Once at home, she feels apprehensive of her young daughter who has not reached home as yet. Then she receives a phone call:

"Hello, mummy, Jassi here!"

"Jassi, you? . . . Where are you calling from? There is snow all around . . . Where are you?"

"Mummy, don't you worry. Listen to me . . . I'm calling from interchange. All the buses to our part of the town are cancelled. Should I take a cab and come?"

"A cab? . . . No, no, don't take a cab. You just walk across. No, but don't even walk it . . . It's dark already . . . a cab is all right. . . ."

"Mummy, hurry up and tell me! I've no more change on me."

"All right, take a cab, then . . . But make sure . . . that the cab driver is not our Indian or Pakistani . . . he should be a White man . . . you understand. . . .?"

In some of the short stories, Raghbir Dhand dwells on the theme of search for identity, alienation from the land of birth and reconciliation of contradictions in the adopted land. He is particularly averse to religious fervour in human relationship. At times he takes recourse to humanistic values when the going gets tough. He has a wry sense of humour that highlights the oddities of a situation. He deftly interweaves the plot and seldom leaves a dangling strand. His approach to the characters is unbiased. Incidentally, he is rooted

to the soil of his birth but at the same time he accepts the time-tested values of the land of his adoption. His cosmopolitan outlook endears him to the readers at home and abroad. It is perhaps this aspect of his short stories that has prompted Rana Nayar to translate these into English. He has done a commendable job at the time when the readers in Punjabi have started ignoring his contribution to Punjabi fictional literature. Indeed the stories have been meticulously translated and artistically presented.

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Of War and War's Alarms and 21 other stories, by R.W. Desai, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 2005, pp. 217, Rs. 100

Better known as a renowned Professor of English at Delhi University and internationally known as editor of *Hamlet Studies* (1979-2003), Dr RW Desai started appearing as a short-story writer in his mature years. Of course, not without a touch of professorial learning, the short-stories that Dr. Desai has gifted to us in English make an interesting reading, each offering an 'impression' of life 'with the maximum economy and felicity of expression'. The Stores, as the author himself says in his direct address 'To The Reader', are 'indicative of social awareness, of life's irony, of happiness, of frustration, of gender difference.' The list, as he puts it, 'is endless.' Every story included in the volume offers fresh experience of life narrated with severity of style and serenity of temperament, imparting profound insight into one or another aspect of the affairs of men. What the book can do to the reader

is indirectly stated through a quotation from WB Yeats who put it down 'On Being Asked for a War Poem,'

We have no gift to set a statesman right;

He has had enough of meddling who can please

A young girl in the indolence of her youth,

Or an old man upon a winter's night.

Evidently, wars will go on, and so will go on the wars' alarms, and yet life will go on for ever, and so would go on for ever the human interest in tales old and new, enjoying all that is good, discarding all that is bad. Dr Desai's stories belong to the first category, promising to impart pleasure not only to the present-day generations but to many more to follow in future. The main point about a short story, as Shashi Deshpande has remarked, is that 'it is just brief, but concentrated. Just one moment of time,' she goes on, 'brilliantly illuminated. And that anything which is there—even a nail on the wall, as Chekov said—has to

have some role in the story.' Now, come to think of the stories in Professor Desai's volume of short stories, namely, *War and War's Alarm and Twenty One Other Stories*, even the seemingly innocuous one on recovering a ruined car! Each of these stories offers a representation of life clearly and cogently. We feel the presence, in these stories, of a sensitive and feeling persona, inclined to look for "order" in the life around him, implying a vision of life free, peaceful and humane; a life beyond race and region, class and community.

One also notes, while reading Professor Desai's book, that the author is always in command of both the subject in hand as well as the technique in use. Unlike many academics-turned-writers, Professor Desai does not sound derivative. On the contrary, he seems to have discovered his own voice, a very important development for a writer. As Boris Pasternak has said, it is not your subject that matters, but how much you are involved in it. One can say of Professor Desai with certainty

that he is fully involved in each and every subject he has handled in the stories he has given us.

One can also say with equal certainty that the stories in *War and War's Alarms* have come out of the writer's own thoughts and felling, not out of any ideology or theory. And yet, it is equally certain, that the writer, like any other writer of significance, is not at all melodramatic. Although not quite dramatic, his stories are pretty impersonal and objective. Like any mature work of art, these stories express an idea as experience, and turn experience into an idea. We can now reasonably expect from Professor Desai a longer book of fiction, a novel, in the near future. The book, with gripping narratives, is bound to make the reader ask for more. Reading these stories in the present publication is an added pleasure, for it is so well done that it seems like an art piece itself.

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Mahābhārata: The End of an Era (Yugānta) edited by Ajay Mitra Shastri

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The Mahābhārata War was, or thought to be, such a momentous event as to leave an indelible impact on the life and culture of not only the Indian subcontinent but on all the other countries where Indians migrated in strength and lived for some time. There were several important personages in India and abroad named after the Mahābhārata characters and places in far-flung areas are found christened after them. The *Mahābhārata* is still being lived by Indians and by those imbibing Indian culture elsewhere. One cannot think of Indian religion, philosophy, thought-pattern and literary genres without the *Mahābhārata*.

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ISBN: 81-7305-274-3 Rs. 800

Co-published with Aryan Books International