

Feudalism's tentacles



THIS IS WHERE THE SERPENT LIVES

By Daniyal Mueenuddin, Hamish Hamilton, ₹699

Daniyal Mueenuddin's book comes seventeen years after his Pulitzer Prize finalist story-collection, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*. In *This is Where the Serpent Lives*, his first novel, Mueenuddin returns to his homeland, giving readers a portrait of the lives of the *sahibs* as well as their *khidmatgars* in Pakistan's cities and its feudal countryside.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which also works as a stand-alone novel/long story. What link these novellas are their recurring characters and themes. The first section focuses on Bayazid, or Yazid, an orphan on the streets of Rawalpindi. Despite this, Bayazid rises in this world as much as a man of his station can through his understanding of how the world around him works. The second section tells the story of Rustom Abdalah, a US-educated, young man who is now looking after his farm

in South Punjab. We witness Rustom as he struggles to understand and maintain the existing power equations and come to terms with the reality of his situation. We are also introduced to his second cousin, Hisham Atar, who, along with his wife, Shahnaz, and his brother, Nessim, becomes the focus of the third part. The final section is where these threads converge. But the spotlight here is on Saqib, the ambitious son of a poor gardener, who rises to become a farm manager at the country estate of the Atars.

Questions of social hierarchy and personal ambition are at the core of the novel. Mueenuddin uses his characters to portray a society where feudal ways continue to thrive and determine an individual's station. It's a society where the law treats one according to power and status. The only way for the ambitious but powerless is to make morally compromised choices and hope to evade the consequences, at least till they have amassed enough power to wiggle out of paying the price for their choices. This contrast between per-

sonal ambition and morality emerges most sharply in the characters of Bayazid and Saqib who take different routes even as they walk similar paths.

This is Where the Serpent Lives is a book that thrives not on a fast-moving plot but on characterisation. The characters in the book are what stay with the readers; they, irrespective of their locations in terms of economic class, feel like living, breathing people. This is also true of the minor characters, such as Zain Awan, who only appear for a few pages but manage to leave their mark. But it is Saqib and Bayazid who remain the most alluring. Mueenuddin's characters also work as foils for one another, bringing out the contrasts among them even more clearly.

Unfortunately, much like the feudal, patriarchal society that it portrays, the novel gives little space to its women characters. Hisham's wife, Shahnaz, and Saqib's wife, Gazala, are sharp, intelligent women but they remain mostly in the background.

Mueenuddin's decision to eschew the traditional

structure of the novel helps him focus on one character at a time. This is the greatest strength of the novel's slightly unusual edifice. However, the structure can also have the effect of alienating his readers. The sudden jump from one character's story to another's feels abrupt and unexpected. This is particularly true of the first shift — from Bayazid's story to that of Rustom. The novel's structural choice could be seen as the author playing to his strengths as a storyteller but might not sit well with a reader expecting a straightforward narrative. This also means that, like in a short-story collection, not all parts will feel equally strong

to all readers.

Readers looking for a quick-moving, plot-heavy narrative will be disappointed too. There is much that happens in the novel — it covers the time period from 1955-2013 — but it doesn't adhere to the rhythm of a fast-paced novel. However, the slow and controlled pacing allows Mueenuddin to develop the inner lives of his characters, something he excels at.

This is Where the Serpent Lives is a novel which portrays not only an unjust society but also the struggle of the powerless to claim their share of power, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not.

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