

Heart of darkness

SAD TIGER

By Neige Sinno,
Seven Stories, ₹599

Is surviving the trauma of child sexual abuse impossible? Is one damaged for life? The recent English translation of Neige Sinno's *Sad Tiger* challengingly shows how child rapists residing inside the family assert their brute power over innocent victims for long years. As a victim-survivor, Sinno provides a visceral account of how her stepfather systematically violates and destroys her childhood. On reaching adulthood, she initiates legal charges and brings him to justice. He is convicted but because he is a model prisoner complete with a "spiritual awakening", his sentence is shortened. After prison, he goes on a pilgrimage and "meets a woman twenty years his junior". A deeply religious woman, she forgives him. Together they set up home and raise "four children" in an "organic farm".

Sinno writes *Sad Tiger* twenty years after the trial, after relocating to distant lands, and after becoming a mother. She unpacks her story over two sections and numerous vignette-like chapters and deploys a wide canvas drawn from literature, history and related fields to examine her personal narrative on destruction and survival. As an aesthetic exploration of child sexual abuse, she recast her queries on recollections, representation and recovery as a search, a journey which doesn't have any real *telos* or conclusion other than the ability to connect and converse through writing. Consequently, the private story of destruction that her perpetrator cunningly crafted in darkened corners

of their rented apartment in a remote mountain village acquires literary gravity and her perturbations about her traumatic memories assume historical importance through examination of survivor stories of holocaust and genocides.

Sad Tiger presents questions that daunt and haunt the reader. Sinno reiterates that the abuse is a "profound and systematic humiliation that destroys the very foundation of the self", a destruction from which one can "never truly recover". But why? Don't therapy, theory or religion offer solutions? In at least two places, she states that she's never been in therapy or analysis. She doesn't explain her refusal other than saying that she doesn't know why and that where she grew up there were no such facilities and that people fear interventions. But as a successful academic and author, should she not be a proponent of theory? She says that she has not "read any feminist theory" and is "viscerally incapable of believing in anything spiritual". More than her personal answers, Sinno's observation about 'talking' is striking: "The taboo in our culture is not rape itself, which is commonplace everywhere, it is talking about it, thinking about it, analyzing it." Therapy, theory or religion can help the individual, but when the malaise is this widespread, answers must be found beyond the clinic.

But the problem of recovery is intrinsically related to the question of punishment. After all, if the inspiration of *Sad Tiger* is drawn from William Blake's "The Tyger", then the poem's famous last line, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?", remains unanswered. Besides the philosophical or existential inquiry into the making of



good and evil, Sinno weighs the problem of punishment in terms of its goal. Given the outcome of the legal case, her questions prompt the reader to rethink the issue of punishment and reform. Legally speaking, the stepfather's post-prison life should be regarded as a positive instance of rehabilitative justice as it follows the presumption of crime and punishment in which reform and not ret-

ribution is the end-goal of punishment. But Sinno challenges the idea of reform and argues that unlike victims who might end their lives in shame, rapists seldom do, instead, they "demand their right to a second chance" which society willingly gives them after handing them "long prison sentences". Possibly, the intention behind writing *Sad Tiger* is to offer a more fulfilling definition of punishment and recovery because she acknowledges that the process of writing leads "to melancholy, but also to rage and to joy".

Sinno's questions and arguments beg a debate, but it cannot be denied that *Sad Tiger* disrupts the rationale of individual crime, punishment and reform. If the family is the seat of both innocence and violence, then the individual lens of reform and recovery is hardly sufficient to address the material and moral roots of the heart of darkness that remains locked in.

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