

Compassionate view

ARE YOU LONESOME?

By Aritra Sarkar,
Penguin Enterprise, ₹499

The loneliness of modern existence has long preoccupied authors — it haunts the wandering consciousness of Marcel Proust, lingers in the emotional landscapes of Virginia Woolf, and finds perhaps its most unsettling expression in Albert Camus's protagonists, for whom loneliness becomes an existential crisis. While loneliness has inspired some of the most enduring works of fiction, it remains surprisingly difficult to write about. Fiction tends to sentimentalise it and non-fiction can lapse into academic abstraction. In *Are You Lonesome?*, Aritra Sarkar approaches the subject neither as a philosopher nor as a therapist, but as a storyteller.

The book marks an important stage in Sarkar's evolution as a writer. His earlier work, *Stress to Zest*, revealed an author interested in experimentation and personal transformation. *Are You Lonesome?* follows a similar structure of three clubbed chapters in each section, an exposition on some of the reasons for loneliness, a story that highlights such a manifestation of isolation and a reflective chapter that is, at times, disarmingly personal. Sarkar's authorial voice has become more assured and mature. The author's inter-



A painting by Edward Hopper

est in personal growth now rests on a deeper engagement with the complexities of human experience. What is more, his storytelling has become more nuanced — for instance, the temporal oscillation in "The Scatman" is deftly handled to add to the pace of the plot, and the dialogues add to the emotional richness of "Where the Heart Returns". The stories invite reflection as they resist easy conclusions. What distinguishes the book is its refusal to treat loneliness as a singular condition. Sarkar understands that loneliness can wear many disguises. It may appear in a fractured friendship, an unspoken grief, an exhausted marriage, a crisis of purpose, or even amid apparent success.

Literary echoes can be found throughout the book's concerns. One is reminded of the insight of John Donne, who argued that no person exists entirely unto them-

selves, and of the profound solitude that permeates the fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro, where characters often discover emotional distances that years of companionship have failed to bridge. There are moments, too, that recall the humane attentiveness of May Sarton, whose writings on solitude explored the delicate boundary between chosen aloneness and painful isolation. Yet Sarkar's work remains distinctly his own. His perspective is shaped by contemporary anxieties: digital communication, fragmented communities and the growing difficulty of sustaining meaningful connection.

What stands out throughout the book is its compassion. Sarkar displays a remarkable ability to examine emotional wounds with sensitivity and nuance, seeking understanding rather than passing judgment.

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