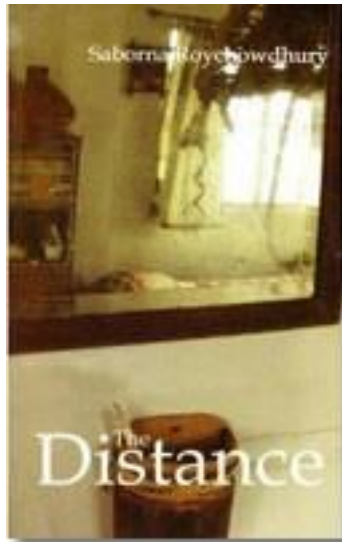


BOOK RECEIVED AND REVIEWED

The Distance

Saborna Roychowdhury



Mindscape;
Kolkata, 1st edition (November 30, 2009)
Paperback, 236 pages
Price: INR 195.00, \$ 10.50
ISBN-13: 978-0578053639

Review by
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Saborna Roychowdhury's debut novel *The Distance* tells a story of a 21st century woman caught up in a series of cultural networks, starting with those of traditional Bengali society, through the political demands (discontents) of certain sections of the society, through diasporic experiences in Canada and finally back into the 'third world' motherland only to realize an agonized selfhood. This type of theme with the basic structure of the emancipation and awakening of a woman is not new literature written in English or in Bengali or in other languages. We can trace this type back to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. What is new about the novel is Roychowdhury's exceptionally reticent telling of a woman's tale through a first person voice, which captivates readers and leads them through certain unexplored areas of our existence in postglobal West Bengal. In other words, she tells a complex story in very simple and homely manner, and readers need not know (postcolonial) theories to appreciate it.

The novel starts with the remnants of the previous century—its people and culture emphatically represented by the grandmother and the old building where “We lived,” as the first person narrator Mini tells, “in a crowded two-bed-room apartment overlooking the busy Gariahat corner where five road arteries intersected: my parents, grandmother, younger brother and me” (p. 13). The reminiscences are so faithful that it may seem as if the writer is writing her own

autobiography and trying to recreate the things. In this the author is successful in raising the description of drab urban daily affairs to a sublime contemplation on the simple things which she lived on and took her sustenance from. But this merry-go-round life soon comes under threat from certain external forces beyond the control of the lower class Bengali people. This threat may be said to be symbolically foretold in the ominous first line of the novel: "My grandmother had a heart attack." This attack caused by contamination on the 'socio-religious' level is linked to the contamination of the traditional Bengali culture by the external forces of globalisation. But the grandmother is introduced at the very opening not simply as an element of forecast. In fact, she is the representative of a society, following whom we find variants in time. The writer has succeeded in making this bond touchingly real and transcendental at the same time. The reader comes to know that though an extreme conservative, she was a rebel in the truest sense of the term, a rebel against the injustice of the patriarchal order of the society. This account is, however, skilfully kept secret until the middle of the narrative.

Mini then comes down to the account of her mother as woman who represents the docile type of womenfolk who would adapt (or are made to adapt) to the family structure fixed by the post-Independence economic conditions. In her case too, we find a history of rebellion against the upper middleclass order that, in spite of its protestations of romanticism and liberalism, would ultimately come down to class and monetary considerations in man-woman relationship. Mini, acutely conscious of the futility of her mother's romantic cause, finds it very difficult to make her choices in the larger world outside.

Here she meets a rebel, in extreme form, in Amitav representing the extremist voice against the forces of capitalism in all forms. And perhaps because of this among other elements, she gets attracted to him as she too nurses some secret elements of rebellion against certain things around her. As she comes into his contact the reader anxiously waits for something terrible to happen just as Mini does. That she supports his destructive brand of politics is evident in the way she keeps his company, falls in love and allows him to make love in a very unromantic and dangerous situation, which is psychologically very much possible. This episode also signals the end of their affairs as Amitav sticks by his revolutionary politics and refuses to accompany Mini. The writer has wonderfully conveyed the utter helplessness and frustration of a girl psychologically dependent on him (more so after the love-making) and financially dependent on the family:

"I wanted to know where Amitav was...what he was doing. I hoped and prayed that he was safe, that he had the good sense to leave the village. At night I sat up in a cold sweat dreaming of Sabir's lifeless body hanging from an old banyan tree..." (p. 68)

This along with her father's forced ending of her education brings about a painful sense of betrayal:

"My life had now come to a complete halt. All I could think about was getting out of the house, doing something different, and somehow breaking the monotony of life...All my wrath was now directed toward the city. I felt the city had somehow betrayed me. I wished to leave the city, the city of big buildings and small minds, the city of powerful men and crippling heartbreaks..." (p. 97)

At this point we find the intrusion of Aunt Rini and her husband into their family and their characterisation is just caricature of the upper class rich people and their activities are also derived from that stock. They are flat characters and sometimes add comic touches to a somewhat sombre story. The character of Neel also can be said to a type representing the so-called 'brilliant' 'careerist' boy seek opportunities, comforts and 'dollars' overseas. However, Neel's subsequent indifference to Mini's hopes and dreams may also be ascribed to his tragic knowledge of her affairs with Amitav; but then, it is pity that in spite of living in Canada he remains so conservative.

The next part of the story after their arrival in Vancouver is told in present indefinite tense and this continues till the end with the exception of the last two paragraphs. By using present indefinite the writer might have tried to convey a sense of indefinite fastness of life on the other side of the globe. But as the reader progresses the constant use of present indefinite also gives a sense of inaction and withdrawal from the affairs of life on the part of the first person narrator, which is the true case with her. But the use of this tense form produces a different tone towards the end of the novel and makes Mini's final resolution somewhat weak. Despite this, the writer succeeds in communicating quite beautifully how a woman may feel about certain simple household things (which are sometimes called 'feminine') as an extension of her personality:

"I enjoy my newly found thoroughly. I look at the stove that has an inbuilt oven to bake cakes and make *tandoori* chicken. I open the huge fridge several times a day to stare at the neatly placed food containers on the shelves with pride. My own stove, my own fridge! This is the first time in my life I have owned or used something that belongs exclusively to me." (p.137)

As with the see-saw pattern of the narrative, this seemingly happy conjugal life, however, soon turns into a bitter one and the writer deftly tells how women (even men) can feel ennui and boredom amidst abundance and can turn into a walking shadow.

Things begin to move on only after she gets to know the impending danger her family faces. The threat to life just because of the land has been

entrenched in the minds of Calcuttans as a simple rule of the jungle. The nexus of the promoters, criminals, political leaders and police has almost brought about a kind of collective psychosis and nobody really cares about it because it is beyond the power of the ordinary citizens. The rise of the new shopping malls, high rise buildings and new culture all over the city can also be traced back to this tragedy of old urban existence. In the face of this kind of satanic force, Mini's father, now an old man, emerges heroically as he tries, though with no success, to resist it. Ironically enough though, blessing comes from this promoter class at the end of the novel when the "...Ballygunge house falls in the hand of a promoter [who]...promises each of the sisters a spacious three-bedroom flat." (p. 234). The concluding part of the novel starts with Mini's return to India. The reappearance of Amitav once again changes the course of Mini's life and that of the narrative quite dramatically. The rest of the narrative hurries faithfully on to the final resolution/dissolution Mini has to find through accidents and choices.

Finally, it can be said that the author shows promise with her first novel and readers will be looking forward to the fulfilment of the promise in her next works.

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