

Anuradha Marwah-Roy. *Idol Love*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1999. 229 pp. Rs. 190 (Hardcover).

To call *Idol Love* a novel of ideas will be to overlook its more literary merits, yet to focus only on its artistic elements is to minimize its insightful examination of an important moment in contemporary Indian history that threatens to dominate all other notions of India. *Idol Love* is Anuradha Marwah-Roy's (now Anuradha Marwah) second novel and is a sharp dystopia of the consequences of India's hard turn to Hindu fundamentalism in the 1990s.

The story is in three parts, covering a span of roughly seven decades beginning with the suicide of a married woman named Rajni. The love affair between Rajni and a professor of Urdu literature, Riaz Ratnakar (a specialist in Ghalib), becomes the pattern for other star-crossed lovers in the novel: a different Rajni and a music teacher (Shyam born as Rashid Ahmad), and the writer of the stories of the lovers and her publisher.

The novel is composed of complex layers of thematic and formal elements. Formally, the novel structures itself as a writer's meditation on the significant people in her life as she constructs their stories from events that forced themselves upon her. Thematically, the novel explores issues of domestic violence, religious identity, the confluence of politics and religion, the nexus of social circumstances and personal decisions, the function of art, and more. The sheer ambition of the novel threatens to pull it apart into several directions, and there are certainly some sections that are stronger than others, but the whole manages to cohere without closing off further reflection at the end.

The first part of the novel could easily be the entire novel of writers such as Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri (Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* and Lahiri's short-story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, both were also published in 1999). *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) tackles some of the same issues surrounding the nation state and identity but doesn't touch fundamentalism. To be fair to Desai, the destruction of the Babri Masjid was still four years into the future, but the currents of Hindutva fundamentalism were certainly flourishing in the 1980s—the VHP and the RSS along with the Shiv Sena were loudly proclaiming all manner of chauvinistic ideas. I realize I am lumping together several regional and national strains both within and outside the various movements, but my point is that India in the 1980s and 1990s was in a period of great turbulence and many of the answers coming from the right promoted a much more monolithic India. And, yes, the British had constructed a monolithic colonial other Hindu India so that postcolonial reconfigurations are to be expected, but there are a

number of paths available and there is no necessity for a monolithic self as a response.

The various female versions of Rajni and the lover (Riaz, Om, Shyam) are purposely made multiple, I believe, partly in response to the narrowing of circumstance and identity through an appeal to religious fundamentalism.

The first Rajni comes to the un-named writer character in the novel through her friend, Anita, who is concerned that her husband, Riaz, may have contributed to Rajni's suicide. Anita works in Atlanta as a computer programmer while Riaz teaches Urdu language and literature in Ajmer, and they shuttle back and forth as their schedules allow. Their modern marriage is contrasted starkly with the more traditional marriages of both Rajni and the writer. The relationships could form a continuum of traditional to modern with Anita's at one end and Rajni's at the other; although all the marriages are unhappy in their own ways (*a la* Tolstoy), Rajni's is the most distressingly so. She is trapped in a loveless marriage and her value is defined entirely in terms of the male children she can produce. She has three daughters, a drunk for a husband, and a mother-in-law who has climbed the traditional family's power structure quite successfully herself and is now committed to making Rajni pay her dues fully in order to gain any recognition. By pursuing a higher degree in history, Rajni clears a little space for herself but further alienates her family. Researching Gahlib's response, Rajni comes across Riaz Ratnakar whose bicultural name reflects his mixed Hindu-Muslim family roots. The character of Riaz will become Shyam in the part of the novel which is set in 2062 and will serve to reflect both the forced erasure of history and an attempt to recover it. Marwah sets out the competing tensions and historical parallels deftly and with some arresting images that are fitting since a fair bit of the concern of the novel is with the process of the reification of the self. The love affair produces a rape (not by Riaz), abandonment, an unwanted pregnancy, and finally Rajni's suicide.

Two historical events propel the novel's present and set in play its future: the destruction of the Babri Masjid (1992) from the purported birthplace of Ram in Ayodhya; the "miracle" of the statues of Indian deities "drinking" milk (1995). In the novel, the fundamentalists and Hindu chauvinists are able to use the former to raze the area of Muslims and begin their virtual disenfranchisement, and the latter to consolidate political power by resting sovereignty not in the people but in religion.

The last part of the novel takes us into a future in which Hindutva ideology has refashioned Indian society into a tripartite structure with Ramins at the top, Dasas in the middle, and Drohis at the bottom. The Ramins, have through the political party of the Sadhoos have taken the

old notion of Brahmin superiority and combined it with the religious ideology that has turned Ram into Poornaramin who is now seen as the original singular God who became the trinity. Their future India is a nostalgic return to the legislative framework of Manu supported by contemporary technology. In this future the upper caste men and women have recourse to all manner of surgical and assistive reproductive technologies to turn them into the long-limbed, peaches-and-cream-skinned, almost ephemeral beings of fundamentalist imaginary. The women are forced to select one of two roles: the ardhagini or the sadhvi—that is, the Victorian Madonna/whore/manager of the household or the professional business woman with no other desires.

The Dasas are comprised of all the other darker laboring castes and allowed to be servants to the Ramins. The most inferior group is the Drohis (traitors) and these are all those who are considered unassimilable and form the exotic other of the Ramins. The Drohis are composed almost entirely of Muslims who are “encouraged” to take on Hindu names. The ghettoized Drohis are forced to live in apartheid like conditions with passes required to visit and work in Rajdhani (Delhi’s new name). Upward mobility for the Drohis consists in becoming sanskritized enough to be inoffensive to the Ramins. Of course, in such a stratified society the most exciting taboo is love across caste-class lines. The Rajni of this future has a caring husband, and she is clearly an investment; however, she is not measuring up—not socially, not physically, and not emotionally. Into her life comes the Drohi music teacher Shyam as her Ustad Sahib. Shyam immediately realizes the Bollywood film script that Rajni is following.

Earlier, I mentioned Desai and Lahiri, but the most significant comparison to Marwah’s novel is Margaret Atwood’s dystopic novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* in which a fundamentalist Christian patriarchy has taken over large parts of North America. Unlike Atwood’s future, Marwah’s completely encloses its inhabitants; there is no outside except sponsored emigration but the sense is that the rest of the world functions with much the same structure. The novel does end with two small signs of resistance and hope: the writer’s ability to create alternative endings for the latest incarnation of Rajni, and the figure of Maya.

Marwah does provide a reasonable framework for understanding Maya’s motivations, but she is ideologically transparent. It is Maya who serves, ironically, to tear away the veils of consumerism and patriarchal domination from her fellow slum dwellers. One would expect more characters in a novel so rich with ideas to be one dimensional, but the main characters are rounded and complex. It is a testament to Marwah’s skill that in *Idol Love* we get fully realized

characters who wrestle valiantly—and at times blindly—to keep their futures open in an India that seems at times to be getting constrictive.

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