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Chilled out in the Caribbean

Neil Bissoondath's The Worlds Within Her is an ambitious novel with no rough edges

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The Worlds Within Her
Neil Bissoondath
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Buy it at BOL

Turbulence is the theme of Neil Bissoondath's The Worlds Within Her - its idol, its goal. The novel begins with Yasmin, a middle-aged Indian, preparing to return her mother's ashes to the Caribbean island where they both grew up. Yasmin inhabits the suburbs - of Montreal, of the imagination. During the day she works as a television newsreader where she twists her mouth into whatever expression of sadness or wry amusement is appropriate for the video footage being broadcast. At night she goes home to her husband Jim, stolid and older than her. He offers her anchorage, a life hoovered free of danger. Or so she had once thought: her daughter has recently been killed in a car accident.

The Caribbean that Yasmin encounters is a post-coup warzone. The buildings are scorched, the shops looted, the roads blocked. There's little immediate comfort to be had at the house of Cyril and Penny, her uncle and aunt. They find her cold and her manners rather affected. Even one of the servants, the surly fundamentalist Ash, scorns her lack of interest in Hinduism. He can't understand how Yasmin can worship reason or why she uses it to insulate herself from the loyalty he thinks she owes to the Hindu diaspora.

Bissoondath intercuts Yasmin's tentative attempts to compile her own oral history with the confessional reminiscences her mother Shakti had spilled out to the bed-bound Dorothy Livingston, one of the few friends she made in Canada. We learn that Yasmin's father was a surveyor-turned-politician whose oratory had stirred islanders to clamour for revolution.

He was corrupt (naturally), and the passion of his rhetoric did not carry over into his emotional life. He married Shakti for the prestige that her family's elevated social standing would bring. He insisted that dustjackets trivialise the books they cover, but

require. Nor is Yasmin's mother, an anglophiliac snob who eats toast using a knife and fork, any better.

In consequence, Yasmin finds it very hard to 'give out', to deal with feeling. Bissoondath has taken a big gamble in centring the novel around such a palpably dislikeable character. Her heart seems to be permafrozen. While she is eager to ascribe loneliness to people around her, she seems oblivious to her own isolation. By the moment of revelation 40 pages from the end which is meant to humanise Yasmin and her parents, our emotions have long congealed into indifference.

The repellence of its characters is not the novel's main flaw. Rather, it is the language. It has been flossed of all the gleeful impurity that vitalises Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Earl Lovelace. One longs for bumps and glitches, the verbal equivalent of the roustabouting anti-teleology that the book seems to endorse at a thematic level. Instead, Bissoondath strives for pellucidity.

Unfortunately, though, the dialogue - and there's reams of it - too often exhibits the kind of over-articulate earnestness familiar to anyone who has ever watched one of those made-for-TV movies about, say, high-powered New York businesswomen who abandon husband and high-flying law company for a life helping out dirty-faced, golden-hearted refugees.

Bissoondath's anaemic prose also degeographises the novel. We learn little new about Canada, the Caribbean or, indeed, London. Both Yasmin's father and uncle spend time, as marginalised politician and pre-independence law student respectively, in the English capital. It is portrayed - all too generically - as the landmark-clotted, small-gardened, racist antithesis of a Caribbean island which, equally predictably, is lushly chaotic and marginal.

The Worlds Within Her is, none the less, a weighty novel, not only in size but in the important themes it addresses. These include transmigration, the relationship between memory and history, the extent to which personal identity is a fixed category. It is, in short, a rather typical postcolonial novel. And, as with most typical postcolonial novels, one finishes it feeling slightly better educated, slightly moved, slightly impressed. The breadth of Bissoondath's ambition and his philosophical and historiographical insights are laudable. What he lacks, though, is a feeling for hysteria, triviality, bad taste. He needs not just to write about turbulence, but to write turbulently.