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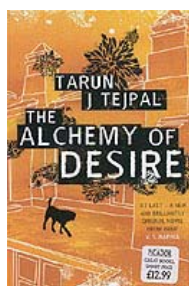
Indian summary

Can Tarun J Tejpal's *The Alchemy of Desire* live up to VS Naipaul's ringing endorsement, asks Tabish Khair



Tabish Khair
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The Alchemy of Desire

by Tarun J Tejpal

518pp, Picador, £12.99

This is the Indian novel that has been endorsed by VS Naipaul: "At last - a new and brilliantly original novel from India," he says on the dust jacket. Tarun J Tejpal's *The Alchemy of Desire* would have been significant even without this endorsement, as it is written by a major contemporary editor and publisher, a person who, as the publicity material puts it, is "famous in India" for his uncompromising journalism. What Naipaul's statement does is raise the question: can ordinary criticism support his endorsement? Are the 518 pages of this novel thick enough to bear this burden?

The Alchemy of Desire is initially the story of a couple obsessed with each other and, at least from the perspective of the male partner (who is also the narrator), with sex. This male obsession with sex is sometimes effectively channelled to narrative ends but it never really reaches the density of, say, Nabokov's *Lolita*, partly because it sounds too much like the obsession of Anglophone Indians from professional classes, an obsession that is defined, even in its absence, by the paucity of ordinary sexual opportunities available to that particular class in India. The "hard-ons" of this class stand in a strange oedipal relationship to the "hand-outs" that used to obsess their parents' generation.

From this initial obsession, the novel treks through the narrator's attempts at writing different novels and his life as a journalist in Delhi, until it reaches the source of its dramatic tension on page 281 with the discovery of a cache of diaries written by Catherine, a glamorous American adventuress and the previous owner of the house the couple have bought in a hill station. This moves it to a colonial phase, tracing the trajectory of Catherine's relationship to the son of a nawab and other matters, which actually holds more urgency than the narrative of the first half. It returns finally to the narrator and his wife, by way of the mystery of Catherine's death, and in doing so returns the narrator to his wife and to ... love.

The Alchemy of Desire is an ambitious novel: it not only attempts to encompass much of contemporary India, it also forays into colonial territory (Jim Corbett, hill stations, white goddesses, brown lovers). Moreover, it is a narrative about desire and writing. Implicitly, it is also a partial exploration of the risks of digging up the past, where the narrator's experience is posed against the public "digging up" of the past by religious fundamentalists. Given such extent, the novel sometimes falters under the weight of its own intention. While it has much that is admirable, it also contains much that appears

repetitive and incidental.

In the first half, the novel is at its strongest when it inscribes the diurnal rhythms of the narrator's life: conversations with an elderly servant over chai, spare bachelor flats in Delhi, whiskey talk, highway vignettes, the tragic unraveling of a (Sikh-Muslim) marriage. In the second half, it assumes the urgency of a thriller which merges oddly with the slower rhythm of the first half without becoming too discrepant. Throughout, it reveals Tejpal's eye for characterisation and description. The novel also traces a very novel-like progression, which might explain Naipaul's enthusiasm, of the narrator's perception of desire. The novel's initial lines ("Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is.") turn into the concluding observation: "Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. Love ..."

Another aspect of Tejpal's art that might have appealed to Naipaul is his narrator's capacity to make magisterial statements. Tejpal does this well enough to remind the reader of Naipaul, except that he does not always stop in time. "We delude ourselves about the neatness of life. The truth is no life is neat ... The hidden sprawl behind the face at the door is always vast," pronounces the narrator impressively. But then he goes on, as Naipaul's narrator would not. These flowing lines rattle into a mundane list of "demons" and grind to a halt with the bland statement: "All lived lives are a mess."

Such odds and ends prevent *The Alchemy of Desire* from becoming all that Naipaul claims for it. It is no doubt a significant first novel, but one would need to shut more than one eye to consider it as good as other debuts from India Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* or Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*.

• Tabish Khair is the author of *The Bus Stopped* (Picador)