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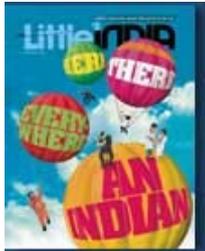
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Review of Pomegranate Dreams

By Michelle Reale

Pomegranate Dreams and Other Stories
By Vijay Lakshmi
 Soft cover, 230 pages
 Indialog Publications



The lore of the pomegranate tree gets no short shrift as a preface of sorts to Vijay Lakshmi's Pomegranate Dreams and other stories. Possessing great meaning to cultures as disparate to one another as Armenians and Indians, and religions such as Christianity (Jesus' Passion and Resurrection), Islam (the fruit cleanses the spirit of envy) and Parsis (who utilize the twigs to make their sacred broom), the pomegranate is described, thus, as a "cluster of deep red or pink juicy berries tightly packed inside a thick hard shell," and the fruit is said to "laugh" when ripe and the shell splits open.

With this in mind, one expects tightly packed stories exemplifying the insularity of experience. This is a reasonable expectation and one that becomes fully realized with a clarity that gradually builds and cracks open into understanding. While Vijay Lakshmi may have never set out to consciously explicate anyone's experience in particular, she does just that.

Portraying outsider status in general and loneliness and alienation in particular, this collection is existentialist in its outlook but, surprisingly, not devoid of the hope that lies imbedded beneath all difficult experiences.

Vijay Lakshmi is soft-spoken and smiles easily. An interviewer's dream, she is forthright without being obnoxious, and informative about her work without being egotistical and pretentious.

She pulls no punches, though, when she explains to me that at the root of all of her fiction, is the theme of loneliness, almost exclusively. She states this with such agency, I quickly realize, and correctly so, that for her, this theme is not simply a handy vehicle for writing dramatic stories, but a firmly held belief that loneliness is the root of all human experience. She began writing upon her arrival to this country quite a few years ago, as a way of making sense of being an immigrant in a new land and navigating the difficult cultural map that stretched out ahead of her.

She says that it is important to tell her stories from different viewpoints, showing that the outsider experience transcends social and financial status, and even age. She elaborates: "Pomegranate Dreams is told from the viewpoint of a little girl, whose "voice" is immature and, seems at first, to be the one adjusting to her family's move from India to the United States with tremendous difficulty.

Later on, she comes into a hard fought understanding of her place in society." While the narrator's place in society may vary, Lakshmi is consistent with and determined to keep the main focus on the female experience exclusively, explaining, " I have always thought it much more difficult for women to get used to living in a different culture than it is for men.

"Men usually, but of course not always, have their work, which may be the primary reason for leaving one's country in the first place. Women are often left to their own devices, suffering homesickness and confusion about customs and social expectations."

Indeed, seen from the eyes of an adolescent like Juhi, in Pomegranate Dreams, confusion and sadness loom large. Eyeing her new home for the first time, Juhi experiences a rush of emotions and a sort of sensory overload, giving the view of her new home a frightening and sinister tinge: I thought we had arrived at the edge of the world, the bounds of beyond. One step more and we would plunge into empty space. Except for a small clearing where my father had parked the car, and except for a huge brown rock with tufts of grass hanging from the crevices, we were surrounded on all sides by nothing but a mass of towering trees that blocked the sky and cast

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moss shadow on the ground. I still remember the splintered sky above our heads, the dandelions at our feet. And I can still remember the taste of fear in my mouth as I imagined reptiles, dinosaurs and winged beasts lurking in the undergrowth.

Juhi laments all that has been left behind with poignant descriptions of an India that will remain frozen in her psyche:

We left behind my grandmother with whom I had lived all the years of my life. . . we left behind the stone house where champa, chameli, marigold and bougainvillea jostled to out-bloom each other; the pomegranate trees with slender spiny branches, from which parrots swung, prying the fruit open with their sharp beaks. . . we left behind monkeys that leapt from one branch to another. . .and we left something else, too, a sense of belonging which seemed to have slipped off like a bundle from the top of a bus climbing a mountain road. I couldn't believe that we had exchanged that bounty for a tiny house with a grizzly cherry tree whose gnarled roots were splayed like fear unleashed in the dark.

What becomes vividly clear in these stories is that loneliness is almost always coupled with fear not only of the unknown, but what is different as well. To further my understanding of what makes this experience truly "mind altering," Vijay Lakshmi leans forward for emphasis when she explains the concept of Sanskar . Lightly touching her curled fist to her heart, I know that I am about to hear a sentiment that is the crux of her writing thus far: "Sanskar," she cautions, "may lie dormant, but could flair at any time. It is what has been instilled into you from your family for generation upon generation. It is that which is deeply rooted in us through generations of readings, rituals, thoughts and emotions, and not at all easily dismissed or forgotten."

In the title novella, Juhi and her mother struggle along, but her older brother Bansi approaches everything with a Gandhian point of view, seeing their arrival in the United States as a grand opportunity more than anything else. He works steadily towards his goals, very much like the father in the family, with his eyes clearly on the future, and not mired in what he sees as mere petty daily life adjustments.

While Juhi turns in on herself and goes through each day kicking and screaming, cousin Priya appears to grab life by the flank. Individualistic and rebellious, Priya is determined to survive any way she can. With a chronically malcontent mother and a father for whom all of life's best opportunities appear to have passed him by, is singularly determined. Interestingly, this is where the author seems to turn tables on us. Casting off any pat and easy endings, the culmination of this novella will give readers something to think about and brings fulfills the corollary of the Pomegranate which is hard on the outside, but shelters what is valuable on the inside.

Seven other stories complete the collection beginning with "In the City of the Storks" and the surprising location of Spain, where an Indian professor and her companion, the terminally ill Ben, go for a conference where, it turns out, he will spend the last days of his life, highlighting the stark realization that if living far from one's home is a trial, dying away from one's home is even more so. "Touchline" is poignant in its rendering of a very westernized Indian woman who returns to India in the (futile) attempt to get her mother to relinquish everything and return home to the states with her. Back in Jaipur, her mother exists in a ramshackle home, infested with rodents, but seems not at all bothered by their presence.

While the old woman remembers her life many years ago, her daughter feels a shifting of worlds, between the life she led in India, and her very different life in the states:

I envy her such moments. I try to think about my life, my family, my short past in America. I don't find any Kashmir or Mysore silks rippling through my fingers. I look at the walls, the trees, the garden of my mother's house. Blurred patterns begin to appear again as if the walls were a child's magic painting book—a few strokes with a wet brush and the scene emerges clear. I am scared of making these strokes. I don't want the past to be brought back. I don't want to be tugged back, now that I have settled down in the States.

A supportive husband, and a well-developed theme, almost an ideology, will keep Vijay Lakshmi writing many, many more stories, and she hints of a novel in the offing, no doubt on some aspect of being on the outside, looking in as well as displacement in its varied forms. Pomegranate Dreams and other stories offer us a kaleidoscopic view of the inner and out dilemma of "home". When Vijay explains further that her Hindu way of life and it's teachings (part of her own Sanskara) advises that we are ultimately alone and prescribes that we not become sucked into this world which is full of desire, no matter where we call home, we see that philosophy directly on the page. But Laksmi's existentialist bent has a ray of hope. As Camus has written, "There is no sun without shadow and it is essential to know the night." Manish, in "Distances" responds to his wife's lament of not being able to smell the night queen flower as she had in India, because it does not bloom in America, responds, "It does bloom somewhere . . . and all the time, too, whether you notice it or not."

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