

Book Review of Usha Rajagopalan's *Amrita: A Read into Traumatic Emotions* by Dr. Sukanya Saha

Abstract: Usha Rajagopalan has much to convey to the modern reader about contemporary Indian society through *Amrita*. The story can be read from different perspectives. It would not be enough to call it a story of two sisters and wash hands off. It has a lot in its store to add to reader's ruminations.

It is a story of Kamala, a mother, who is subjected to agonised life once the realization about her elder daughter's disability dawns on her life. It is also the story of Maya, a sister, who eventually accepts her sister's disability and completely dedicates herself towards latter's wellbeing. It is no less a story of a girl, Amrita, who becomes the epitome of disabled children and is a silent and helpless spectator of life around her. The haplessness of Amrita is there to remain in reader's mind forever. Neither can we extricate Raghu, the father from this web of life who cherishing an eventful past, remains indifferent towards his uncommon household.

Lives and emotions of these characters are deftly interwoven and they naturally evolve out of commonplace. Hence reciprocating to their actions and reactions does not seem demanding to the reader. Story proceeds with narrative accounts of its leading characters. The binding thread of everyone's account is Amrita, her disability, and justifies the title. The blurb of the novel says, "Traumatized by the violent death of their mentally challenged daughter, Amrita, on the night of her sister's wedding, the story behind Amrita's death unravels as the family reaches out to Gauri, each telling her their story". The statement indeed summarizes the chronicle. Narratives allow taking a peek into the lives of characters who confront like puppets in the cruel game of destiny. No one among them seems to have control over situations and fall prey to circumstances crowding around them, let alone Amrita, who was not endowed with the gifts of mental maturity.

Kamala's dreams of leading a blissful married life with a child and husband come crashing down with the revelation of her first child's abnormality. Mother's heart however denies coming into terms with the stark reality and it's disheartening to see her struggle to enable the child to perform daily chores in vain. Kamala's slogging over available literature on disability and her physical efforts do not seem something out of the world. Indian society, where the strongly rooted stigma for disability governs the psyche, a mother's trauma is comprehensible. She cuts herself off from her duty towards Raghu, the husband, who turns aloof and takes refuge in distancing himself by undertaking official tours. In her devout endeavours towards Amrita's learning, Kamala encloses herself within the constraints of the house where her life came to a standstill. Kamala rightly fears the antagonism of society for her naïve daughter, and loses confidence for public appearances. Story thus holds forth the educated people's attitude towards disability for our realization and criticism.

Kamala's life takes up a turbulent path with the advent of her second child. Conception of course was unwelcomed by a mother who became increasingly apprehensive about giving birth to another child with disability. Kamala's fears however proved to be futile with Maya, the second daughter being absolutely normal. This satisfying pleasure of having a normal child however did not last long. Maya proved to be a hyperactive child, whose tantrums were beyond Kamala's approach. Maya's growing insecurities rising from her mother's preoccupation with the elder daughter turned Maya a rebel. Maya's experiences in school:

her snatched freedom, the vitriolic remarks from her schoolmates about her sister, the constant pressure of performing well in exams all gradually pushed her towards hatred for her mother and more for her 'mad' sister. Kamala's was torn between her two daughters, when her mother-in-law comes to her rescue and takes Maya away. After three years, on her return, we encounter a metamorphosed Maya. She harbours a strange kind of anger for her mother, but surprisingly takes complete charge of Amrita. Amrita welcomes Maya's transformed self wholeheartedly and soon she finds herself entirely dependent on the latter for everything. Maya's selfless dedication to her sister is heart-warming and this increasingly pains the heart to see two sisters parting during Maya's wedding.

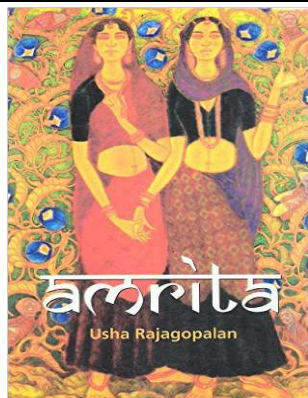
Author's apt dealing with emotions of various shades is immensely appreciable. In her depiction of Kamala's initial reaction after knowing Amrita's disability, her determination to bring her daughter's life to normal and her circumspection during Amrita's birthday party, Raghu's growing indifference and hostility in his behaviour, Maya's instinctive behaviour at school and home as a child, her concern for Amrita as an adult etc., Usha Rajagopalan appears very effortless and spontaneous. She leaves no stone unturned while capturing such plethora of emotions in words. It is facile to substitute Kamala, Maya or Raghu with our own self or anyone from neighbourhood since her characterisation does not proclaim intricacy which hinders reader's response.

Kamala is an exemplary of women who never lived and enjoyed their own lives. Her sufferings mute her wailings for attaining a social standing as a human being of considerable substance. Through her account which she outpours to her confidante, Kamala emerges as a woman whose agonies were never ending, and who was never truly understood neither by her daughter nor her husband. She lost her youth due to negligence of husband and neither could cherish a dutiful daughter's regards at an old age. She remained destined to everyone's miscomprehensions. Maya has some other story to narrate. Suppressing much in heart she turns hostile to her mother and never confides in her. This adds to mother's agonies. Amrita's death was a secret which Maya buried in her heart is shockingly revealed at the end, leaving the reader pondering over lot many questions. Raghu, does not startle an Indian reader with his inadvertent attitude. We cannot however blame him for his indifference.

Apart from these characters, around whom the story revolves, characters of Gauri, Revabehn, Sunder, Ganesh etc. form an integral part of the story. Gauri as a confidante, Revabehn as an elderly maid, Sunder as a wayward bachelor and Ganesh as an understanding companion leave an indelible mark.

To conclude, *Amrita* gives a read which moves. It leaves tears in eyes and an endless series of questions keep haunting. Once picked up, it is difficult to put it down owing to its realism.

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