

# Serpent's teeth, in India today

## BOOK REVIEW

### We That Are Young

By Preti Taneja. 479 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$27.95.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

Critics, like exterminators and exorcists, are in the business of bringing what is hidden into the light. To make the implicit explicit, as Samuel Johnson had it, to root out elusive associations, half-invisible effects — to identify how a text works, and why.

On good days, that is. “We That Are Young,” a hectic new novel by Preti Taneja, a retelling of “King Lear” set in present-day India, was published last year in Britain to much acclaim. It’s a doorstep, full of sound and fury, more nihilistic than Shakespeare’s original, with all the blunt and dismal machinations of a soap opera.

It’s not a subtle novel. Then again, “King Lear” is not an especially subtle

play. It is, however, *mysterious*, somehow both cosmic and intimate, which the best adaptations — like Jane Smiley’s “A Thousand Acres” and Edward St. Aubyn’s “Dunbar” — understand. Taneja’s very busy book, in contrast, leaves little room for the reader to experience the strange, shifting identifications the original play makes possible, the way we can turn from pitying Lear to loathing him.

Devraj, an aging tycoon (our Lear), plans to divide the shares of his company among his three daughters: steely, ambitious Gargi (Goneril), frivolous Radha (Regan) and his youngest, his beloved Sita (Cordelia), who has a fiery activist streak. The novel maps neatly onto the play; Devraj demands a ritual show of love and loyalty, independent-minded Sita refuses to comply, and the tragedy is set in motion — the rivalry, the storm, the brutal blinding. Add to that a handful of subplots involving India’s anticorruption protests of 2011, the conflict in Kashmir, a slum inspired by one of Dante’s circles of hell, a massacre of

peacocks and a poisoned apple.

“Too drawn-out,” George Orwell complained of “King Lear,” “too many characters and subplots.” He believed the play was saved by its poetry, by the intensity of its vision. Taneja’s take on Lear suffers, however, from the opposite problem. The narrative is easy enough to track, but where is the emotional truth of the story? We get motifs instead, grist for a dozen stimulating term papers: the inheritance of historical trauma, the unresolved repercussions of Partition, vivid examples of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival.

“‘We That Are Young’ is not realist fiction, nor was it ever meant to be,” Taneja has said. “That kind of fiction is predicated on a Judeo-Christian linear understanding of time and mortality inappropriate to the India of the book.” She has taken abundant care to find what she thinks is a more fitting form, one that spirals occasionally into fable and back again, but no such attention seems to have been lavished on the language. On a sentence level, the book is a shambles. Exposition is



Preti Taneja.

meted out in clunky dialogue; themes are announced in portentous, nonsensical mantras: “All creatures rush to their destruction, like snowflakes on the breeze.” There are some painfully awkward descriptions; when strands

of Gargi’s hair escape her hasty bun, it’s described as a moment when “lose entrails fall around her face.” Although you can sense the influence of Bret Easton Ellis and Martin Amis in Taneja’s broad characterizations of her villains, they lack the savagery and panache. She is fatally attracted to syrupy metaphors and has a tin ear when it comes to humor. “There’s definitely a samosa missing from the high tea selection,” is the sort of thing that passes for wit.

Furthermore, why make this book so ethically easy on the reader? Good and evil are so plainly signaled (you shall know iniquity by beef-eating and cocaine-snorting). Although each section is written in the first or a close third person, we rarely meld with the consciousness of the characters. The author keeps elbowing them out of the way to telegraph her contempt for them, their venality, their obscene wealth.

Still, Taneja is a writer of considerable energy and invention. She is unflinching when it comes to the world

she conjures: the “rabid dogs biting each other to death,” the “ragdolly fetuses spat from waste pipes in the back lanes of the city.” At the climax of the book, there is a murder scene recounted with such deliberate and frightening pacing, such a mix of triumph and psychosis, it’s up there with anything Mary Gaitskill or Susanna Moore has ever written.

These are the moments when Taneja takes control of the book. It’s when she ceases strenuously “writing” — cracking awful jokes or remarking on the mosques “blushing” at daybreak — and begins to ask questions of her characters and herself, that we get an entirely original take on Lear. We see, for example, a far warmer portrayal of the sisters than we have ever encountered — of their gilded cages, of the wedge forced between them. (“He divided us for his own pleasure,” Gargi thinks of her father. “Like meat torn from bone.”) It’s then that we experience a new, chilling take on one of the oldest stories in the world: “See what happens to all willful girls?”