



The Dancer, Her Lover and the Yogi

Bhagwati Charan Verma

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Eastern philosophy and romance converge in this novel that reads like a fable.

Bhagwati Charan Verma's novel *The Dancer, Her Lover and the Yogi* braids Eastern philosophy with a whirlwind romance and offers a satisfying if melodramatic fable on the tension between desire and renunciation.

The novel covers a year in which two disciples of a guru go out into the world in order to gain the experience necessary to aid their understanding. One is sent to live in the home of a well-to-do man, Beejgupta—the lover in the title, whose beloved, the dancer, is the unashamedly sensual Chitrlekha. When the renowned ascetic yogi Kumargiri meets Chitrlekha, his tightly held values of self-denial are challenged. And when Chitrlekha and Kumargiri engage in an affair, Beejgupta is left devastated. The novel follows these complex relationships, all framed by the students witnessing them and the mentor who sent them on their path.

The central plot point of the convergence of Kumargiri and Chitrlekha grounds the philosophical underpinning of the novel. As Beejgupta explains to his visiting disciple, Shwetank: “Kumargiri and Chitrlekha are both full of ego and slaves to their feeling of mine-ness. But their means are exactly contrary—one has sought refuge in the spiritual path, and the other in self-confidence.”

Both of these characters are strictly attached to their ways of life and by the end of the novel they undergo the most change. This transformation seems to come a little too easily, though, as Kumargiri is early on depicted as an almost straw-man ascetic, his arguments for his lifestyle riddled with inconsistencies when presented to the much more eloquent and convincing Chitrlekha.

This novel is a satisfying love story that offers plenty of food for thought on many deep topics, including the nature of sin, right and wrong, and lust and purity. The prose and movement of the plot is sometimes melodramatic, with simplistic, straightforward sentences that express equally straightforward ideas. In effect, the story becomes more engrossing than it is challenging to read, so that it ends up reading more like a fairy tale or fable than as ornate literary fiction.

The book is a translation of Verma's 1934 novel *Chitrlekha*; the prolific author, in addition to many novels, wrote scripts for Bollywood, an influence that is felt in the plot of this serious and thoughtful love story. Both the editors and translators have done a wonderful, clean job, producing a text that is easy to understand, and complete with a glossary of some Sanskrit and Hindi words and concepts that may be new to readers less versed in Indian culture and philosophy.

While the philosophical conclusion of the novel may fall short for some, its ideas are palatable to a general audience, and the dramatic love story will sweep readers along.

NATASHA GILMORE (April 20, 2016)

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