

Broken Melodies: Fit for screen



Author and screenwriter Gajra Kottary

If *Broken Melodies* were to be filmed into a television series, the most important resource for the producer would be to ensure the supply of plenty of glycerin. Each of the characters - Niyati (the main protagonist), Nisha (her elder sister), Sumiran (her mother) and Paaji (her father, the classical musician who adores his *tanpura*) are either fighting tears or letting them flow. It's a depressing household indeed.

Towards the end of the book, when an ailing Sumiran says that their house, Shankar Chand Nivas, can never be home to anybody, you vehemently agree.

Is this book a tear-jerker? Not in the traditional sense. Your eyes don't brim with tears out of sympathy. But there are parts that are disturbing. The gloomy setting, the constant undercurrents of a volcano about to erupt amongst the parents, the non-stop accusations

made my mother to father, and sister to mother - these are not characters you want to live with, but their innocence engages you nevertheless.

It is here that Kottary proves to be a solid story-teller, building strong characterizations. Her sense of visuals is strong and her prose lends itself to very vivid pictures in the reader's mind. Which is why, many portions of this "bittersweet novel about growing up", set in Delhi of the 1970s, are dramatic, not for the purpose of creating drama *per se*, but for the uncomfortable visuals it conjures up.

If parental conflict is the underlying theme of this novel, Kottary depicts it well from the youngest character's perspective.

Like, the chapter in which Paaji erupts in violence, almost knocking off one of his wife's teeth. Like, the scene where you almost stifle a sob when Nisha breaks down and accuses her warring parents of robbing her of her childhood. The recurring tension that Niyati feels - her father threatens to stab himself every time he loses his temper - is shared by the reader as well.

Niyati thought of the lucky tanpura. Then she thought of Mummy. Mummy and the tanpura, the tanpura and Mummy. Like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that belonged to a whole, but did not match their edges exactly.

Why is Paaji suicidal like this, is never made clear. (For example, why does he not threaten to kill his wife, if he hates her so much?) By showing the lack of sensitivity from their neighbors, what Kottary also seems to be suggesting is that common-folk would probably never understand the life and devotion of an artist.

Even as Sumiran struggles to cope with the philandering ways of her husband, the author doesn't explicitly state the physicality of Paaji's relationship with one of his favorite students.

A scene at a chemist shop, where Sumiran suspects one of the students of buying contraceptives, is particularly effective.

The author already has a couple of award-winning TV shows to her credit (*Balika Vadhu*, *Astitva*) and in this book, she shows some command over writing long-form fiction as well. She is certainly a director's writer and the characters far more suited to saying their lines in Hindi. Thankfully, the publishers have released a Hindi translation of this book as well.