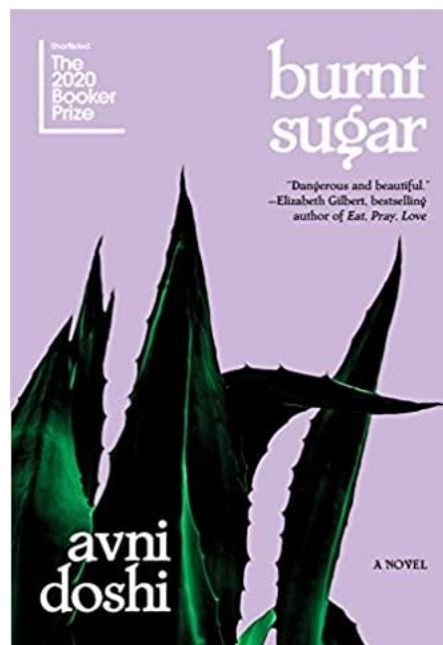


BOOK REVIEW:

BURNT SUGAR: A NOVEL

Reviewed by: Ahmad GHOLI
Gonbad Kavous University, Iran



Burnt Sugar, By Avni Doshi, New York, The Overlook Press, 2020, 240 pp., \$26.00 (Hardcover), ASIN: B08JG4ZZXW.

© The Author(s) 2020

Burnt Sugar is the debut novel of Avni Doshi; an Indian American writer who currently lives in Dubai. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020. Avni Doshi was born in New Jersey. She received her BA in art history from Barnard College and her MA in history of art at University College, London. While working as an art writer and curator in India, Doshi began writing fiction. She has been awarded the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize and a Charles Pick Fellowship. Her debut novel, Burnt Sugar, was shortlisted for the prestigious TATA Literature.

Received: 19/08/2020
Accepted: 23/09/2020
Published online: 30/10/2020

Introduction

Burnt Sugar is the debut novel of Avni Doshi; an Indian American writer who currently lives in Dubai. This is a love story and a story about betrayal. But not between lovers - between mother and daughter. Sharp as a blade and laced with caustic wit, *Burnt Sugar* unpicks the slippery cords of memory and myth that bind two women together, and hold them apart. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020. The mother-daughter relationship is the central theme of the novel, and the novelist explores it without falling into cliché and sentimentality, and this explains why Antara's feeling towards her mother is ambivalent: she simultaneously detests and nurses her.

Content

"I would be lying if I say my mother's misery has never given me pleasure," says Antara, Tara's now-adult daughter.

Through the first-person perspective, Antara gradually unfolds her mother's life story and its impact on her own life in Pune, an Indian city, albeit without paying attention to the chronological order. The novel begins with the narrator's marriage to Dilip, an American working in Pune. However, it is her mother's conventional marriage that triggers important events in the novel. Against her wishes, Tara (narrator's mother) marries a math student whose ultimate goal is earning a scholarship from an American University. He ignores his wife and daughter but dotes on his mother. His coldness and her continual loneliness at home make Tara run away from home. With her young daughter, she takes shelter in Baba's ashram. There she falls in love with Baba (Osho) and unknowingly, she becomes his sex object. Antara's memories of the ashram are bitter because her mother leaves her alone and spends her time with lovemaking with Baba and his followers in small hot chambers. When the narrator enlarges on the ashram, she exposes Baba's hypocrisy. In place of leading a simple life, Baba enjoys taking expensive Japanese food, driving Mercedes Benz, and watching French movies. After some years, Tara abandons the ashram because it realizes that the place is nothing more than a mystical brothel and herself a prostitute. Once more, she returns to her parents' home and bears their sharp tongues.

Now Antara is a school-age child, and her mother does not have any motherly feelings to her. To get rid of Antara, her grandparents send her to a boarding school run by Mother Teresa. Contrary to popular opinion, Mother Teresa in this novel is a violent and tyrannical character who rules the school with iron discipline. Hence students call her 'The Terror'. Thanks to her illness, the narrator can leave this horrible place. Here readers get familiar with the anti-colonial vision of Avni Doshi. Her negative portrayal of Mother Teresa is in line with the distrust of native people towards Christian missionaries because they view them as the tools of colonialism, not the agents of their redemption.

When Antara grows up, she lives with her mother in the apartment rented by her grandmother. Meanwhile, Tara makes friends with Reza Pine, a Muslim and Urdu speaking Indian, who works in an ice cream parlour. Later, he becomes her partner and roommate. With Reza (whose name means satisfaction in Arabic), the mother and daughter experience the happiest days of their life. Unlike her biological father and Baba, Reza is friendly, romantic, idealistic, and passionate. But when they go to the beach, the beauty and delicate body of Antara throw Reza into a secret romance with Antara. Here the novelist demonstrates what Freud calls the 'Electra complex'. Though Reza is not her natural father, he plays the role of a metaphorical father for her. During Tara's blissful sunny days, Reza deserts her, leading to her depression and possibly to her insanity and dementia as well. Interestingly, Tara's pining and sad state conjure up the word 'Pine' which is the last name of Reza. In this novel, the narrator experiences three father: her birth father (the symbol of soulless and mechanical existence), Baba (the embodiment of carnal indulgence), and Reza (the representation of the fleeting moment of sweet love); however, they fail to behave fatherly. Her pessimism about them creates the aura of feminism in the novel.

With Reza's departure from their life, Antara enrolls for Arts and later marries Dilip. Her new life coincides with the worsening of her mother's Alzheimer. Tara's mental illness provokes an ambivalent reaction in her daughter. On the one hand, she enjoys her mother's suffering. On the other hand, she does want her mother to die. Her mother lives alone in her house. To prevent her from burning of her house, Antara brings her to own home. She nurses her mother in her home studio. One day, when she visits her studio, she finds that her mother has torn her unfinished sketches and splashed colours on walls. Initially, one thinks her wild act is not deliberate and related to her mental instability. But it springs from Tara's outrage at daughter that expresses her love towards Reza through drawing his sketches. By doing so, she sublimates her sexual urges despite having a loving husband.

For the second time, Tara repeats her violent behaviour ignited by detecting Reza's photo in Antara's drawer. Then she advises her daughter to forget Reza's love. She demands Antara to relate her the story of her secret love with Reza, she does. Despite her mental problem, she can take revenge against her daughter by revealing her secret to Dilip and ruins the life of her pregnant daughter. But she does not do even though she abhors her betrayal.

After giving birth to her son, she goes through postpartum depression; thus, she desires to leave home and her routine life. Her abnormal behaviour brings to mind her mother's norm-breaking past. It also illustrates her unconscious desire to imitate her mother despite her effort to maintain distance from her. The novel ends with a hint of mental instability in Antara.

Future

Burnt Sugar as a title is symbolic and well-chosen. It beautifully points to countless frustrations and sorrows that Tara and her daughter underwent in their life. Also, it refers to Tara's dementia because the novelist notes that the brain that consumes a large amount of fat is healthy, whereas the one that consumes a high portion of sugar is unhealthy and unstable.

Avni Doshi's writing style is smooth and flows naturally. She avoids unnecessary and excessive lyrical descriptions that one frequently encounters in pulp novels. Her lucid prose, as well as the novel's first-person point of view, enables her readership to engross themselves in the world of her characters.

Since the novel is set in India, the novelist makes her readers familiar with their music, architecture, foods, smells, tastes, mores and customs of India. It bestows her novel an anthropological edge, thereby enriching it.

In conclusion, Avni Doshi has explored the mother-daughter relationship with subtlety and grace. Her originality lies in a skilful combination of art, medical science, psychology, anthropology, intercultural encounter, and history with literature. This quality makes it an intricate literary work with many layers, rendering it ideal for exploring its intricacy and nuances.