

Repairing Brindavan: India's new anthology of erotica on stands

What happens when the 'plain Jane' Paolomi next door armed with a volume of 'Persepolis 2' meets Bollywood superstar Sartaj Khan, the man of her dreams, on the sets of a publicity still?

She binges at the studio lunch, munches chocolates, dozes off on a corner seat and dreams that she has been transported back in time to 1977 to a government guest house used by former prime minister Indira Gandhi on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with Sartaj Khan for company - a year after the Emergency.

The superstar makes her feel special - with love, intimacy and huge breakfast of eggs, tinned ham and baked beans from an ancient pantry at the guest house.

Enters Indira Gandhi on a holiday with a huge handbag and a packet of Toblerone chocolates. She walks 'through the dream couple unseeing' as they sleep on her bed, rummages through her famous handbag and digs into her chocolates.

'It's not funny' says superstar Sartaj, at the sight of the country's former prime minister.

'It wouldn't be if it were 1976. ...but it's 1977, so laughing is allowed,' says star-struck Paolomi, and promptly wakes up on the sets to see her hand smeared with the remnants of the fruit 'n' nut chocolate that she was trying to eat before she went into a swoon at the sight of Sartaj Khan.

The excerpt from the short story, 'Tourists' by Paromita Vohra is part of the country's newest anthology of contemporary erotic short stories, 'Electric Feather: The Tranquebar Book of Erotic Stories' published in September.

Collated by noted author and columnist Ruchir Joshi and published by Tranquebar Press, the stories are teasing, tender, full of earthy Indian humour as they travel across the heartland of the country to cull tales of desire, young love and funny dreams; featuring everyday characters, situations and sometimes even politics from the states.

'In asking writers to contribute to the book, we laid out the criteria that there was a dearth of good erotic writing in the Indian sub-continent and we wanted to try and start to counter that absence. The writing had to be around and about the erotic. And it could be as graphic or not as the writer liked. And it had to be a work of fiction,' Ruchir Joshi said.

Recalling the making of the anthology, Joshi, in his opening essay, 'Repairing Brindavan', says, 'When I spoke to a friend in British publishing about doing this book, the response flickered between disinterest and mild horror. It stemmed from the fact that even the best bookstores in the UK now have erotica sections overloaded with graphically

sexualised versions of Mills and amp; Boons and autobiographies of porn stars.'

'I wanted to tell my friend where I was trying to come from,' Joshi says, narrating a story.

'A Baul singer was taken on a tour of Germany in the late 1980s. The man was one of the greatest living exponents of the millennium-old Bengali folk music and was also famous for his unceasing

libido. When taken to a sex store by his hosts, the baba wandered around, and then with great sorrow finally said -'My god, is this what they have done to Brindavan (Lord Krishna's land)?'.

For Joshi, who says the collection was conceived under the shadow of 'exiling M.F. Husain, the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan and the assault on a young woman drinking in a pub in Mangalore', the book is a 'statement of resistance against those and other such depredations.'

It is Joshi's quest, as he says, for a 'free, graceful and mischievous Brindavan, where love and physical desire go hand in hand'.

Consequently, as writer Sonia Jabbar narrates in her story, 'The Advocate', when happily-married middle-aged lawyer P.K. Sharma, one of the best in Uttar Pradesh, falls in love with the 'fair and veiled Muslim widow Laila' and takes her on a romp with his Muslim assistant, erotic 'Laila' turns out to be Sharmaji's portly wife, who craves for her husband's love and 'a new beginning' after 28 years of marriage.

The book has 13 short stories contributed by Samit Basu, Rana Dasgupta, Tishani Doshi, Niven Govinden, Abeer Hoque, Sonia Jabbar, Sheba Karim, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, Kamila Shamsie, Parvati Sharma, Jeet Thayil, Paromita Vohra and Ruchir Joshi himself.

It is priced at Rs.395.

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