

BOOK REVIEW

Death of an elephant

Mina Taherifard

University of Mohagegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Daneshgah, Iran

Correspondence to: Mina Taherifard, University of Mohagegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Daneshgah, Iran; Email: Psy.tehrifard@gmail.com

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Old and new books of fiction are abundantly visible on checkout counters, public libraries, and bookstores in shopping malls and on the Internet. They usually deal with mystery, romance, and sellable thrills of life. That explains the conspicuous invisibility of *Death of an Elephant*. It's a novella, self-published by a serious academic. Brij Mohan's debut in the reality-based realm of fiction mocks at the 'absurdities' of life in an otherwise progressive, happy, and affluent world.

When I searched for this novel, the words of an Amazon.com reviewer particularly touched me. Marilyn Romanowski posted her review on February 3, 2014:

"To read *Death of an Elephant* is to embark on a often painful journey where the main character, Pran Dubey slowly unravels in the incompleteness of human reality. Caught between cultures, the main character is neither American nor Indian and he suffers the alienation of being between both worlds. From this lonely position, Pran Dubey repudiates the authority of institutional arrangements which he finds absurd at their essence. Mohan rejects cultural power games over the destiny of man. He upholds the dignity of person in a climate of dehumanizing abuses. This wonderful book is a must read for any deep thinking, philosophical, person who questions life. This book seems to be a modern take on absurdist fiction!" (*Death of an Elephant*, 2016)

Since I have the privilege of translating this soul-searching novel from the original English to Persian, my mother tongue, I am happy to make a few comments. After two readings, I found this book intriguing,

exciting and challenging to grasp. Brij Mohan is a world-renowned social work educator who specializes in social psychiatry and psychology. It is no wonder how easily he delves deep in the depths of the human psyche, emotions, and frailties at his own expense (since semi-autobiographical elements are obvious). Look at the plot and his characters:

Pran Dubey comes to America; he is a professor of history in Mississippi. He works in a setting marked by exclusion, xenophobia, and discrimination. Pran goes back to India and comes back disappointed. He feels alien in his native land; his odyssey to the west is troublesome. He finds joy in transient pleasures without righteous pretensions. His honesty and transparency are both liability and asset especially for those who love and hate him. He makes no effort to make any one happy. In many ways he is like the elephant that he admired during his early childhood in Nagaria. He projects the ego of his "baba" (grandfather). I need not go to the end, which contains the congenital optimism of this apparent existential pessimist.

As a clinical psychologist, I find this novel like a metaphysical thriller; it may also be likened to a muddy diamond hidden under the heap of shining (artificial) jewels. The commercialized promotion industry has no room for a modestly paid university professor who writes for catharsis and self-satisfaction rather than making profits. The power of celebrity novels is corrupting. Genuine pearls remain unnoticed and unrecognized. Professor Joseph Ricapito's fabulous Foreword to *Death of an Elephant* is a tribute to the author's genius. I close this critique with a few

words from Joseph:

“The term ‘magic realism,’ used with respect to the work of Garcia Màrquez, perhaps best explicates aspects of this fine novel. In the parts devoted to India, we sense all the smells, colors, the tastes of India, its folklore, its history, above all, its sociology in its attitudes and habits. The prose here is lyrical in that it attempts to retain the lilt of the translated Hindi

speaking patterns....Mohan has expertly charted this voyage from early urges for permanence in an impermanent world. The author has initiated his mind and his world to the reader in all its authenticity” (xi).

There is a psychological turmoil in the transient journey of a man who insists to swim against the currents. But he triumphs over his death, not unlike Raju, the elephant.

References

Death of an elephant, n.d., viewed January 31, 2018, <<http://www.amazon.com/Death-Elephant-Brij-Mohan/dp/1475994796>>