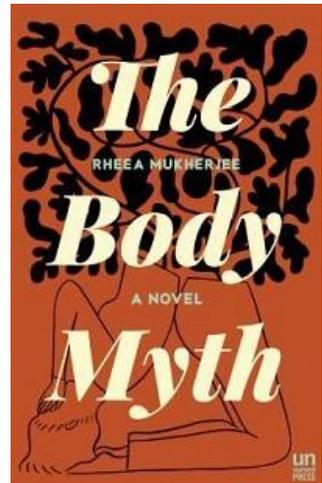


Book Review on Rheea Mukherjee's The Body Myth by Rakhi Dalal

Rheea Mukherjee has rendered her debut novel so skilfully that it captivates a reader's attention from the very first page. As the name suggests, the work is not only a portrayal of conflict between the body and the mind but also questions our understanding of the body narrative entrenched in our minds because of lifelong conditioning. The body here symbolizes human desires and the mind stands for the thinking faculty, which largely gives shape to our thoughts and determines our actions. The motive of the title of the book seems to be to bring to our attention the conceptions regarding our bodies as according to the widely accepted notions of morality.



At certain places, the book is uncomfortable to read because it evokes questions that we might not find easy to answer. Questions like:

Do we know our bodies well? Does our body, in any way at any time, act differently than what our minds ask it to do? Are our minds aware of what our bodies need or desire? Does our mind always follow what our bodies dictate or do they

feel conflicted between desires and the accepted ideas of morality?

The book starts with an advice or caution, if you prefer, by the author to take the story, as one would take a large pill and rightly so.

Mira, the protagonist of this work, tells the story. Delivered in first person, the narrative is so captivating that it immediately engages the reader. The narrative isn't linear though, we are told the story as and how Mira finds it suitable to tell us, so the reader is kind of jumping in and out of Mira's head while reading. As soon as the reading commence, the characters become so vivid that one can almost visualize them, envisaging in mind the scenes and the dialogues as one reads along. To give an insight into the work before the reader dives in, the narrator says:

“When I look back, I see myself as an Indian city on the verge of finding an identity. And then I lost control, expanded without direction, without a plan, becoming a vast series of interconnected roads, chaotic lanes, and fumes that left my body and mind exhausted.”

In a way, it sets the tone for the things to come in the narrative. With the novel progressing, Mira's struggle in finding her own identity through the chaos of her everyday life becomes evident. She loses control sometimes and moves as the tussle between her body and mind pulls her in opposite directions.

In the very beginning, Mira comes across a married couple Sara and Rahil in a public park and feels drawn to them. She witnesses Sara having a seizure and doubts the authenticity of it but still feels attracted to the couple. Prior to meeting them, Mira's husband had died in an accident and she had stayed at an institution trying to cope with her situation.

While at the institute, she read writers like Camus, Sartre, Foucault and de Beauvoir. At one place, she says that these writers led her

back to life and saved her from committing suicide. Later, she thinks it was her acknowledgment of treating grandness of life as futile while compared to the need to move on amidst the humdrum of daily life that had saved her. She had finally come to a point where she found grief bothersome and longed for a kind of normalcy to return to her life.

Sara's suffering attracts Mira. Her mental illness plagues the couple and reminds Mira more of her late mother, a mother who was a victim of depression and whose memories are at best a blur in her life. One can see why she might have been attracted to Sara, who also seemed to be in pain.

Their meetings turn more intimate and gradually a poly-amorous relationship is developed. The central premise of the book seems to be the transformation of a dyadic relationship (Sara and Rahil) to triadic relationship as narrated by the third partner and protagonist of the work, Mira. It explores the dilemmas that they go through in their relationship, their actions and their coming to peace with their reality, which might not necessarily align with the readers' ideas. It is definitely not a commentary on the ethical or social aspect of such relationships, but is about the acceptance of each other as a partner, an acceptance that finally comes as result of a conflict between the body and the mind.

Mira and Rahil are devoted to Sara. Mira regards Sara as some kind of Sufi mystique and believes that both she and Sara share some purpose in life. Their conversations however, are not as elevating as Mira's own musings at times, which are enjoyable. Though the 'grand ideas of hope' as postulated by Philosophers might not carry a weight with Mira as she struggles to get along the tediousness of her daily life, but their impression distinctly characterise her thoughts.

Sara's illness, her mental breakdown and seizures are self-imposed, a culmination of baseless fears and overprotective behaviour of her parents while growing up. Rahil knows about this. When Mira

comes to know through Sara's doctor, she makes both of them realize the futility of adapting to such false notions and helps them come to terms with their lives. Still, her almost saccharine allegiance to Sara in the knowledge of this might seem too unrealistic to the reader, their idea of a normal, happy life together, bit infantile. Beside, since one does not hear much from Rahil, the reader has least idea about his love for Mira.

Her engagement as a teacher gives voice to the need to reconsider the deep-seated ideas around our education system, emphasising more on the need to critically examine ideas, thereby making the process of learning more interactive and thought provoking.

Polyamory being a taboo subject in most societies, their relationship is kept a secret from everybody, even from Mira's father though she is close to him. Towards the end, Mira takes Sara and Rahil (her supposedly live in partner as told to her father) to meet her father and introduces them as siblings. This is a point, which a reader might find unnerving. Meera's reluctance to tell the truth to his father is understandable, but their evident coming together lets one question the extent to which one can exercise pretence to avoid conflict or hurt.

In the end, their relationship reaches a conclusion in Sara's departure from Mira and Rahil's life. It is as if the epicentre of their lives shifts from illness/grief to tranquillity with each of the partners finally reaching an imperative juncture in life. In a sense, the author makes the relationship dyadic again, to provide a kind of closure to the story by confirming to established societal order.

This work might be an uncomfortable read but it certainly is indelible and is bound to leave a mark upon the mind of the reader.



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