

Book Review on Jayanta Ray's *Tales of Square Field*

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The stories we tell ourselves tell the story of our life. Through those stories, we create, build and divine the world around us in our unique light. That is the way the world becomes ours — that is the way we derive meaning from it.

In this book *Tales of Square Field*, the author, Jayanta Ray, does precisely so — he injects into his physical world, his own mental creation, and the two worlds meld and move together in harmony. There is no friction between the two, no conflict between his mind's creation and the physical entity. On the other hand, he draws inspiration from the mirage he has, and in that way, imbues his banal existence with sense and sensibility.

Right upfront in the Prologue, Ray informs the readers that it has been an 'eternity' since the bond was created between Arjun, the humble schoolteacher, and the 'highly sensitive flat land' Square Field, in the 'mofussil' town of Baharampore in Bengal. Described variously as the

‘oxygen tank’, ‘nerve centre of activities’ and even ‘listless ground’ and ‘vivacious radiating body of landmass’ the SF begins to don a personality in the readers’ mind.

It is interesting to note the origin of this unusual connection—an introvert college student from a rural background thrown into an alien environment finds comfort in books and the make-believe worlds. It is a smooth and logical extension into the real world — the thinking and talking and deeply insightful flat piece of land he encounters on his daily trips to the school where he teaches or the NGO where he works or any place else.

Arjun, the protagonist, admits his behavior and frequent forays to the field are viewed by his friends as being a little ‘weird’, but his clear intellectual superiority in his college coupled with his love for the written word provides him the leeway to get away with it all.

Chapter 1 opens with a quote from *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, and that is illuminating: For the young teenager, the diary was a ‘source of comfort and support’ in the most difficult days of her life, Arjun views SF (Square Field) in a similar way.

We also get a view of the relationship between the protagonist and SF. SF tells him about an unfortunate woman, Sita, in domestic distress and asks Arjun to help her through the NGO, Asha, Arjun is associated with.

It may be a bit far-fetched, but SF gets to know what’s going on in Sita’s home and details of her ‘SOB’ husband

through its extraordinary ability to ‘eavesdrop’ on other’s conversations that take place in its property. But let’s put aside our skepticism here, and get to the heart of the matter. SF is Arjun’s conscience-keeper, the alter-ego Arjun employs to lead what he believes is a good life. Of course, it is itself not insignificant that Arjun enjoys teaching students, and bringing to life subjects like history and geography, while his young wife Minu teaches Indian music at their home. SF with its almost-always socially well-intentioned interventions takes Arjun to the next level of a well-lived life.

There are other instances when SF draws Arjun’s attention to a wrong that needs to be righted.

Life events overtake Arjun — his wife has a baby, school politics gets in the way, both sets of parents come to stay with the couple for short spans following the birth of a baby boy. Through it all, SF and Arjun remain bonded — and as the narrative progresses, the nature of the bond opens itself up to closer examination.

SF is a construct Arjun has created to mind his mind. SF is a piece of land that Arjun loves for the peace it brings him, for the fact it probably reminds him of his own agricultural roots back in a Bengal village, a long time ago. Through the SF construct, Arjun weighs his own thoughts, argues with his opinions and holds forth from another point of view when he is faced with a dilemma. On page 30, where Arjun and SF are holding forth on the state of workers and what the government can do, and should do, this is self-

evident. Such intellectual cogitation must emanate from Arjun, SF can only be the medium.

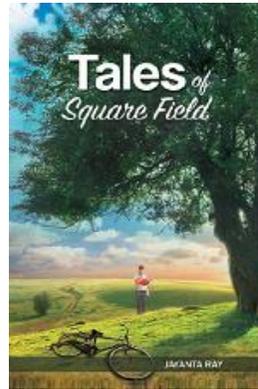
The narration is interesting, if sagging in parts (like the murder in Chapter 6, or the academic session on Ramayana in Chapter 8). The description of his visit to his parents (Chapter 2) to announce his wife's pregnancy is crisp, on the other hand, and sweetly endearing in its minute detailing. The interception of his rickshaw by the goons in the guise of Comrades at dusk, as well as their looting of his mother's *laddus* is humorous, and portrays the human side of the goons. The so-called Comrades can't be so evil that homemade *laddus* can suppress their evil desire.

There are fitful descriptions of typical small-town activities — a game of cricket, a lost boy, moving pictures, even the unseemly happy allure of a budding illicit relationship with a student. There is a sense of 'mofussil' right through the book, and some more descriptions of nature, the Ganges and trees and flowers would have lighted up the town-images in the reader's mind.

Though saddened by the devastation of its property, the disappearance of SF in the last chapter remains a bit of a mystery to the reader. It is abrupt and not totally convincing, but perhaps, the writer exercised his right of creation (and therefore annihilation), and thought it fit to do away with the alter-ego in the advancing life of Arjun, who was now well-set in his life and ways, and probably, in

his construction of a social conscience too. All in all, it is an engaging read.

Title: Tales of Square Field
Author: Jayanta Ray
Publisher: Frog Books (2016)
Genre: Fiction
Language: English
ISBN-10: 9352017587
ISBN-13: 978-93-52017-58-4
Paperback: 150 pages
Price: Rs. 150
Available: [Amazon](#).



Author's Bio

Widely travelled both in India and abroad, Jayanta Ray has already authored three works of fiction *A Town by the River* (2009), *Withered Leaves* (2011) and *a Slice of Life* (2013). An alumnus of JNU and a former student of Heidelberg University for short-term studies, he works as a freelance translator for German/English languages, besides pursuing creative writing. He lives in Hyderabad with his wife.

Reviewer's Bio

Meenakshi Jauhari Chawla trained as a computer engineer but works now for an independent publishing house in New Delhi. Her fiction has been published in The Little Magazine and Sahitya Akademi's journal, Indian Literature. Her poems were part of a poetry volume entitled I, Me, Myself (Unisun, Bangalore, 2010) and the The Poetry Society (India) Journal (2010).

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