

Exploration of womanhood

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PIA GHOSH-ROY'S 'And I Am the Arrow' unfolds at its own measured pace, drawing the reader into a family saga of buried secrets, difficult compromises and quiet resistance. Set primarily in Calcutta, the novel lets the city's social and historical textures surface unobtrusively through the intimate story that plays out at the Chatterjee Mansion.

At the centre are three women — Mishu, her mother Ira, and family servant Bani — brought together as they keep vigil over Niyoti, the formidable family matriarch lying in a coma. Their waiting becomes an encounter with the past, softening old distances and allowing them to see one another anew: "I knew nothing about the woman I thought I knew best in the world. Nothing about the girl she'd been or the young woman she became. That this Niyoti ... is my Thima."

At the same time, the novel opens onto a spectral world through Wah, its ghostly narrator, and the unsettling voices of the dead. Even Sylvia Plath enters this realm, her presence extending to the title, drawn from a line in 'Ariel'. The allusion resonates with Ghosh-Roy's exploration of womanhood, familial bonds and the forces — personal and circumstantial — that shape a life.

Through these relationships, the novel's deeper concern with inheritance emerges — not of property or social position, but of less tangible burdens passed between generations: fear, disappointment, silence, shame, desire and forms of love that often remain unspoken. The characters inherit not only the consequences of earlier choices, but also the patterns of feeling and behaviour that shaped them. Ghosh-Roy is particularly attentive to the distance between intention and experience: protection can become secrecy, love can turn into control, and sacrifice can leave its own residue of resentment. Beneath the family's tangled histories lies a deceptively simple question: how well can we ever know those closest to us?

That question is reflected in Ghosh-Roy's characterisation, which resists easy judg-



AND I AM THE ARROW

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ments in its portrayal of women and men. The women are rendered with particular sensitivity to their contradictions and vulnerabilities, while Rathin, too, is given a complexity beyond his role in their lives. As Mishu reflects, "My mind's a mess... Rathin, Ira, Girish. I'm built on lies. What's the truth? Is there a difference between truth and what is true?" The uncertainty also finds expression in the novel's formal design.

The book is most compelling in its shifts between voices. Rather than privileging a single authoritative account of the Chatterjee family, Ghosh-Roy constructs a narrative in which competing perspectives produce different versions of reality. This allows the same past to acquire new meanings with each act of remembering. The ghostly narrator deepens this effect, occupying a liminal vantage point from which the dead can perceive dimensions of the living that remain beyond those alive.

Holding these shifts together is the novel's quiet, reflective tone. Its touches of humour and irony temper the darker elements, while the restrained emotional register gives the characters room to emerge through their contradictions and vulnerabilities.

'And I Am the Arrow' leaves behind not a single revelation, but the more unsettling recognition that the lives we think we know may contain stories beyond our reach. Its final achievement lies in making the personal feel at once intimate and strangely universal.

— **The reviewer teaches at GGDSD College, Chandigarh**