

## Quests of the Old and the Young: No Utopias

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**Rabindranath Maharaj** A Perfect Pledge. Knopf Canada \$32.95

Neil Bissoondath The Unyielding Clamour of the Night. Cormorant \$32.95

Reviewed by Stella Algoo-Baksh

A Perfect Pledge confirms **Rabindranath Maharaj**, its Trinidadian-Canadian author, as a major post colonial writer and potentially a worthy successor to V.S. Naipaul. Strongly reminiscent of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the novel is overtly and perhaps deliberately derivative, but it treats its East Indian subjects with a kindness and sensitivity lacking in Naipaul's distinctively acerbic work. **Maharaj** highlights the humanity of his characters, who inhabit an often perverse, cruel and mercurial world in which the odds appear to be always against them but in which "a perfect pledge," a pledge which prevents humans from giving up, inspires them to keep working toward their goals. A Perfect Pledge contains none of the scathing, corrosive satire endemic in Naipaul's novel, none of Naipaul's sweeping condemnation of Trinidad East Indians' practices and beliefs, and certainly none of the denigration of the people as living in a place of darkness and dereliction, in which none can achieve his or her potential. In contrast, **Maharaj's** engagement with similar issues assumes a playful and comic tone. This humorous element underscores the writer's empathy with his characters—the mirth accentuating the pathos which underlies characters' attempts to transcend the human condition.

Though thematically postmodern, the lengthy seven-part novel eschews the structural complexity of postmodern writing in favour of a more traditional approach to plot, structure, and chronology. In characterization, the influence of Dickens is obvious as the portrayal of many of the characters borders on caricature. A Perfect Pledge centres on Narpat and his family but zeroes in on what is wrong with everything, with the way people eat, drink, pray, and dress, and **Maharaj** adeptly captures, with his eye for detail and ear for dialect, a bleak, claustrophobic, and suffocating environment. Through gentle satire and humour, he exposes Narpat's eccentricities, especially his inflexible nature. Yet the character's hilarious commentaries regarding the shortcomings of his community often indicate that he is astute in laying the blame for their circumstances on alcoholism, ignorance, and indolence. Yet reader empathy with and sympathy for the characters are secured through **Maharaj's** historical contextualizing, which he does with admirable subtlety. Colonialism and its dehumanizing effects, the author implies, are more than partly responsible for the present circumstances in which Narpat and his fellow characters find themselves. Their devastating effects have been both physical and psychological and the scars they have left will take generations to heal.

The novel posits that some of Narpat's daughters, and certainly his son Jeeves, are on the slow road to recovery, which augurs well for both the younger generation and the East Indian community as a whole. Narpat's construction of a sugar factory to give control over their crops and lives is a sensible idea but comes to no fruition because colonization has robbed him of the opportunities to fulfill himself. A useless windmill symbolizes Narpat's partial defeat, partial because his son has gained insight into his father's goals and will in turn strive towards his own goal—his own piece of land.

A Perfect Pledge is a valuable addition to literature, especially postcolonial literature, and well worth reading for its penetrating insights, its masterful marriage of dialect and standard English, and of course its scintillating humour.

Unlike **Maharaj's** novel, which is positioned in the author's native land, Neil Bissoondath's *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night* explores events in the fictional setting of Omeara, which is distinctly reminiscent of Sri Lanka, a country the author has not visited. Drawing on a plethora of sources, Bissoondath centres on a small town bedevilled by political, religious, and ethnic conflicts which mirror the strife and antagonisms endemic in present-day Sri Lanka. Against this backdrop, Bissoondath follows the destiny of an idealistic young man, Arun Bannerji, who rejects the comforts and security of a wealthy family to dedicate himself to teaching the poor and illiterate Omearan children. Confronted by the townsfolk's

lack of enthusiasm and support and by a dilapidated ill-equipped school, Arun finds his task initially formidable and ultimately impossible. Ever compounding his discomfort, too, is the insidious and pervasive threat of the nearby national army. Though Arun's well-intentioned quest is doomed from the outset, it triggers his awakening, his growth from naivete to a most unlikely hero who makes the supreme sacrifice on behalf of those people whose cause he has not at first recognized.

Plumbing the psyche of Arun, the parvenu, Bissoondath effectively delineates the farreaching ramifications of violence and brutality and of a reality in which even the innocent are entangled in a web of deceit, exploitation, and obscenity. He demonstrates, powerfully, how an innocent's awakening to the fact that he and his family have been implicated in this reality can prove personally devastating. In Arun's case, his personal redemption is secured through an act of morality reflected in his self-sacrifice for what he deems an ethical and just cause.

Bissoondath's writing is energetic and engaging though it is often blemished by an infelicitous usage of words, which renders his prose contrived and unnatural ("in the tenebrous light"; "wounds suppurating"; "obstreperous gushing"). Another problem -no doubt because Sri Lanka is not as familiar to him as Trinidad or Canada would be-is the relative absence of a sense of place, of flora and fauna; scents, sounds, colours and intimate details which writers such as Ondaatje (Anil's Ghost) and Selvadurai (Cinnamon Gardens) capture in their novels. In this connection, the novel is rife with broad, general descriptions (for example: "He looked focusing on clumps of grass and wild flowers that dotted the ground just behind the house: green grass, yellow flowers"). These flaws are counter balanced, however, by several powerful and disturbing scenes involving the burial of corpses and the explosion of a bus.

While the novel commences at a leisurely pace, it does build up to a surprising and satisfying conclusion, though the revelation of the bombmaker's identity demands of the reader a "willing suspension of disbelief."

In this period of suspicion, distrust, and terrorism in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world, Bissoondath's novel is timely, especially since it privileges the idea that evil begets evil; violence begets violence. The author must be commended for exposing the suicide bomber's rationale in a truly objective manner and for having the courage to publish a novel on a controversial and perhaps dangerous issue. Quests of the Old and the Young: No Utopias

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