

A Childhood in Malabar

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This is a memoir about a the war-years, when the writer was a child exiled from Calcutta to relatives in northern Kerala. It was inspired by sessions at a psychiatrist in her mature years, bringing up memories from the distant past, an experience powerful and seductive enough to bring forth this book.

As a book it is totally disjointed. There is no plot, no sense of time, nor place (occasionally we are led to believe that the protagonist is back in Calcutta, but if so its presence is very shadowy indeed) and the steady acquisition of similar experiences eventually wearies the reader, as opposed to the writer, who presumably finds each recollection a precious jewel dragged from the dark sea of oblivion. Still the book has a certain impact on you, by dint of its relentless stream of stories that emanate from the countless characters.

In its rich interplay of characters, rigidly stratified, it makes you think of the Russian memoirs of the 19th century. The protagonist and her family, although strictly speaking not of the highest caste, are relatively wealthy, in spite of the dearth of material possessions that constitute their life. But wealth in India, then as today, resides to a great extent in the cheapness of labour, and children growing up in well-to-do households were sustained by a large net-work of servants. The precariousness of many of the lives are well delineated, depending upon charity and benign employers, scraping up pittancies to send back at distant home-villages. One wonders whether the life depicted in the Indian village of 1940, would have significantly differed from the life back in 1840 or even 1740? In such speculation resides much of the charm of Indian primitivity, as a sustainable way of life and of material renunciation.

There are many references to food, to spices and vegetation; still one does not get from the book a very intimate picture of what it is like living in the Indian tropics, and as noyed above, the iterant excursions back to Calcutta are not characterized by any sense of change. Presumably those aspects of life does not interest the authoress, or she takes them too much for granted, meaning that for a native reader, the tale she unfurls would be more evocally substantiative. Her main interest is voice and the peek every single voice allows into the abyss. Yet in the end, few of any of those memorable characters stay in your mind; and even more regrettable, the memoirs give very little feeling of what it means to be Indian and to grow up in India

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