

Cutting the strings

Pick up a razor blade, open your mouth, slash at the imprisoning ropes of flesh tethering your tongue... Like Tara's, your hand slips and your thumb bleeds. This cut conjures up a face, you add details and the face takes on character, is infused by that which you cannot verbalise, it becomes your hidden-self waiting to break free. So powerfully is the thumb invested with selfhood that Gayatri, the finger puppet, is the main protagonist of Anu Jayanth's book, *The Finger Puppet*.

But is the tyrant just the taunts of 'dumb box' that Tara faces? Wounds lie beneath... Amma cannot hide her bruises, Padmini will leap off a building, Shivaram the exiled son has driven nails into his hands. Then you meet him—

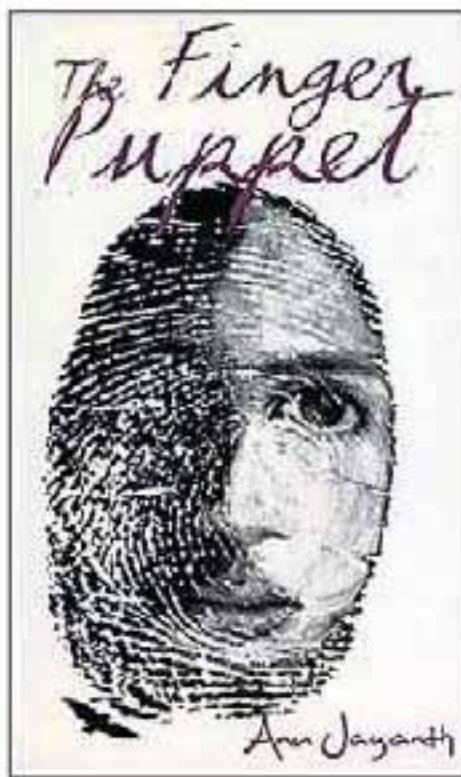
Appa—terror of the Ramakrishna household and Tiruchirapalli. Woe betide one who leaves the mug in the bathroom at the wrong angle.

But behind Appa are other tormentors. Periyar impatient with Brahmanical oppression, and Appa's love for things Western. So it is not just the Ramakrishnas who must fear him, the Gods must too. Appa's business in antiques is less than kosher. His name is associated with stolen idols.

Now this makes Appa vulnerable, but if Gayatri succeeds in ratting on him to the police the women will lose. For then they will be ringed by the 'porkis'. Like the jeweller lifting his *mundu* to the mother pawning her gold. While Tara's thumb considers options from murder to an ayurvedic diet, it takes the more pragmatic Amma to find the real solutions and the dark mother of the cosmos to show the real way.

Multilayered

Now one can read *The Finger Puppet* at many levels. Of the voiceless self rising up against disability (And here it receives unqualified applause). One can read it as battered women rising up against patriarchy (Here the clapping is measured). But at the deepest level it is polemical. The father represents all that Brahmanism fears, or has degenerated into.



The Finger Puppet

Anu Jayanth

HarperCollins, 2008,
pp 361, Rs 295.

Since the lingam as a symbol justifies Appa's tugging of the maids, the novel's protagonists desperately seek an alternate interpretation and present the worshiped lingam as the upraised tongue. The novel holds that Appa's moral faults and deteriorating health is because he eats 'death foods'—and what is that? Egg curry!

As a reformationist argument it is ridiculously naïve, or is it an intense curry of bruised thought simmering in a battered home?

Polemics in novels have that escape hatch. What is not naïve is Gayatri's encounter with the primal mother, from this comes the true possibility of understanding for the beleaguered women and... tradition.

Like many serious Indian English women writers with an international audience, Anu's book revels in detail, the sights, smells, masala, regionality of Indian Life. So the fiery 'kumgumum dot' and how it's applied is covered a few million times. It is a tribute to Anu's book that one understands why this genre should not be dismissed as cultural tourism; At home, the woman needs to be sensitive to the slightest nuance, outside she must ignore the brothel behind the pushcart.

This view, one eye microscopic, the other blinded like Nelson's offers a new take on life. And so one welcomes not just a new talent but begins to identify a new school of writing, principally feminine, dealing with vividly personal issues with vaster moral resonances, set at home, in intensely regional settings yet addressing a global audience. One we may call the spice jar, or kolam school of writing.

An interesting protagonist, believable characters, a powerful story, layers of thought... add to this a beautifully angular poetic style. And you have an interesting (and dense), thought-provoking (and gawky) debut novel that helps us living in the Tiruchirapallis of life to appreciate it and escape it.