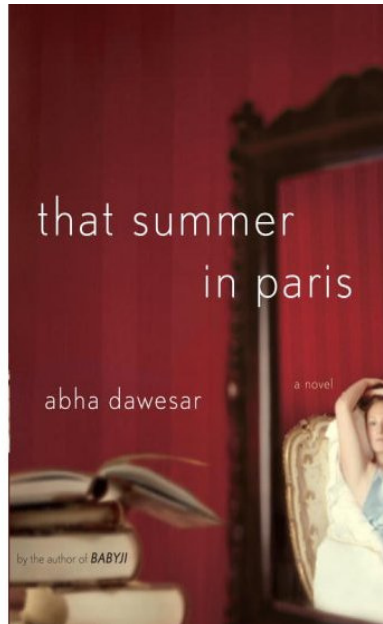


On illusion and love



K. Kunhikrishnan



An Indian Nobel laureate in literature? Yes, Prem Rustom, the main character, a reclusive Indian septuagenarian, in Abha Dawesar's latest novel; (the other two: **Miniplanner** and the Stonewell Book Award winning **Baby ji**). The story unfolds in **That Summer in Paris** in the sensuous summer from May to September, dealing with relationships between authors and fans and with the connections between sex and death, dichotomy between a writer's work and the person he really is, and the preoccupations with aging.

The novelist is enchanted with the splendours of Paris: its tempting bakeries, parks, cheese eating, and many art museums. Paris, "the most beautiful and special was not self or a soul, even if the unbearable beauty of Paris suggested that Paris was a *beau*, a man, or as in *une bille ville*, a woman. The flow of its river, the wide stone of its houses, the occasional raw exposed Haussmannian façade resplendent with magic, glowing luminous in the light of late May afternoon seductively suggested a human consciousness". The recounting of the narrative is with this milieu with the French perspective of love and romance.

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Seventy-five-year-old Prem Rustum, "notorious for shunning publicity and public appearances", believes that he has written his last novel, and "in the absence of women, sex, and further mountains to scale" considers shifting from USA, to India. He longs for one more relationship of "pure feeling" and is ready to try love and the writing of it. While searching his own name on a dating website he comes across Maya Stevenson, a "spiritualist 20 something aspiring novelist with hot buns and yoga body seeking another. Write like Prem Rustum, think like Prem Rustum, be Prem Rustum. Worship at his altar like I do" (p 15). She strikes a chord on meeting her idol. He follows her to Paris, where she has won a creative writing fellowship. He has a close a fellow stalwart writer Pascal Boutin, with whom he shares very intimate thoughts.

Maya and Prem meet and visit museums, discuss paintings and sculpture and shares profound emotions for both, through reflections and flashbacks with their family backgrounds. Past sexual relationships are encumbrance to Prem's present life, as he is not able to get out of them. Looking at a Rodin sculpture, he rediscovers his libido, with the nubile Maya. The past loves of Prem included the intense and adulterous love with his sister Meher, ending with her marriage. Though his writings are inarticulate about sex, he had many sexual encounters, including those at the age of 65 with two French teenagers and with a friend's wife.

The novelist builds the provocative narrative in a slow, interesting and deft style to a climax and ultimate death. The desperate desire of lust reaches a crescendo and after torrid sex, where Maya whispered, feeling "like Galatea coming alive to Pygmalion's kiss, moaning at the sensation of his flesh everywhere against her own".

The novelist probes into the psyche of old writers' innate egotism and insecurity, revealing the working of the mind and how writers and the fictional worlds they create impact the readers. The story explores the ways in which love and sex affect one's artistic thoughts, a remote reflection of one of Philip Roth's works.

The writer's viewpoint comes through her protagonist, (p87): he, "used the prism of his fiction to negotiate his deepest spaces, expressing his fears to the constant scrutiny of anonymous readers all over the world.... Writing was not just therapy, self expression, creation for the heck of it, compulsion, intuition, the twisting of reality, the perversion of facts, the mere recording of reality and even at times the anticipation of real life"..

There are interesting sidelights like the observation on monophonic sounds of South Indian classical music and on Tamilians shouting, "even they are not fighting." The book dealing with the illusion of love has all ingredients of readability.

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