Book review: The Song of Distant Bulbuls by Simrita Dhir

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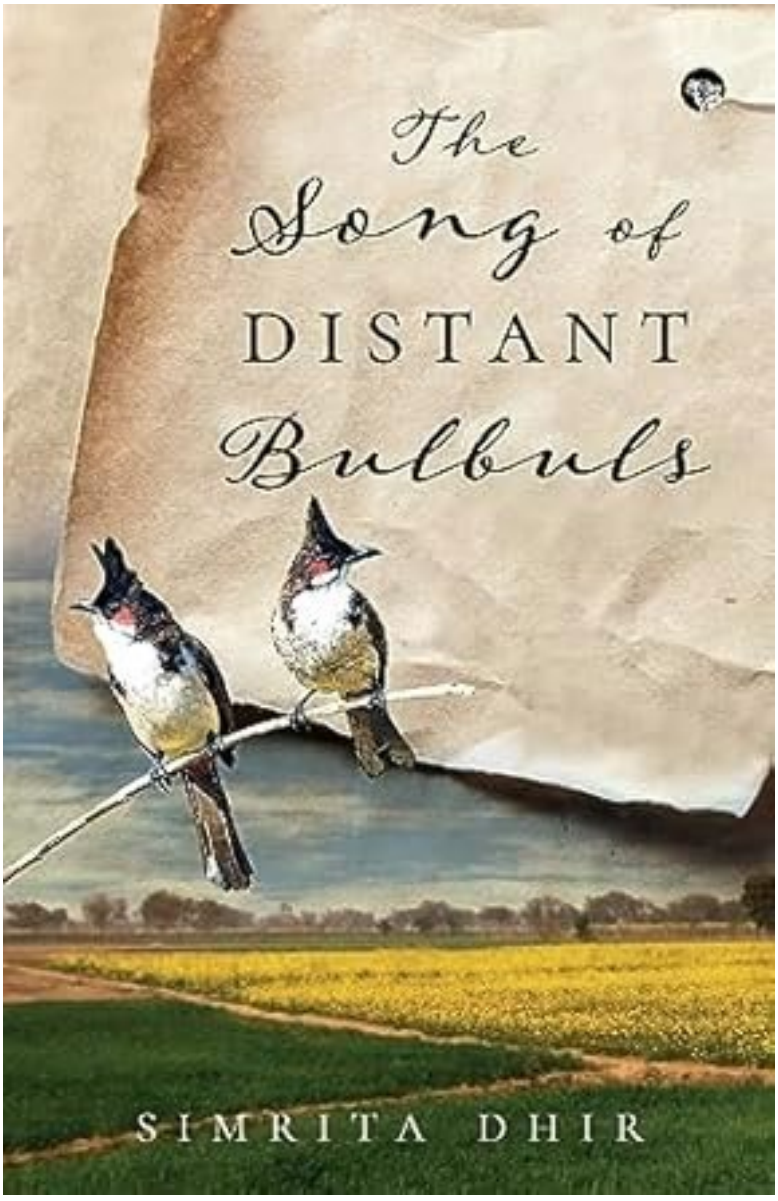

The Song of Distant Bulbuls
Author: Simrita Dhir
ISBN: 9354474357

An Ode to Waiting

Simrita Dhir's novel, *The Song of Distant Bulbuls,* is an ode to waiting. What would it be like for a young bride in her parents' home, waiting for her husband to return from war, especially if the waiting spans seven interminable seeming years? The novel opens, significantly, in the winter of 1946—four months after the end of World War II—in a small farming village in southern Panjab. The narrative progresses through the seasons towards the eventful August of 1947, while flashbacks explore the experiences of the preceding seven years of waiting for Sammi and her family members.

The focal point of the plot is Sammi's inner world, her love and longing for Hari Singh, her soldier husband, who is sent to war a mere twenty-one days after their wedding. The reader gets a glimpse of what keeps Sammi so devoted to her husband, ensuring that neither the passion nor the pain of separation wanes over seven years. By 1946, the eighth year, however, her family begins to despair and plans to get her remarried. Sammi is reminiscent of the figure of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus in *The Odessey*, who waited twenty years for her husband's return from the war, fending off suitors by weaving a tapestry by day and unraveling it at night to delay its completion for she had promised her suitors an answer once the tapestry was complete. Sammi too has her *phulkari*- a form of embroidery specific to Panjab – to focus on, applying as much diligence and craft as she can muster. It serves as both a distraction and a protest against her seemingly inevitable fate of being married off against her will, as she awaits her father's decision on her remarriage.

Sammi's interiority is juxtaposed with the stories of her brothers, Jasjit and Kirpal, who embody the two distinct ethos representing the ideological strands that accompanied the Partition of Panjab in 1947 and the contrasting notions of modernity in its aftermath. While Sammi waits for news of her husband and his return, Jasjit aspires to embody the principles of civil governance in a secular-left-liberal India, while Kirpal seeks his place in the feudal, neo-capitalist conservatism of modern India. Within this context, Sammi's self-formation expands onto an increasingly broader canvas, even as her physical world remains restricted to her village. The world beyond her home and farm expands from her village to neighboring villages, then to the larger town of Sangrur and the train that connects to the city of Patiala. Beyond that lie Kirpal's journeys to Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, and farther still are the distant lands Hari Singh travels to as a part of the British Army during World War II. Letters arrive for Sammi, bearing postage and news from far off lands, alongside reports of unrest in British India, where people take to streets while a few negotiate on the Partition as a price for freedom. Although Sammi remains confined to her house and her village, the world inevitably finds its way to her.

The way Sammi's character is imagined challenges the reader's expectations. One might anticipate her to be submissive to the wishes of her family, especially to the older male members, just like her friends are. Where does Sammi find the courage to endure such severe tests? Though no one would have supported her defiance, the two elder women who raised her, and their incredible stories of survival, are threads deeply woven into the fabric of Sammi's instinct to thrive when her survival is at stake.

The presence of Jeeti Bhua, Jassi's father's adopted sister, and Jassi's mother, Bibi, in the household, along with their life stories, presents a complex gendered perspective on life narratives. This places Jassi on a continuum of self-preservation rather than framing her as an unconvincing anomaly of her time. To that extent, the characters of her father and her older brother Jasjit, who is also her active ally, contribute to this continuum. The surprise of a doctor called in from town and paid handsomely to save the life of a girl child speaks of the norm in this part of the world. To carve Sammi out of these norms while simultaneously supporting her radical journey of character fulfillment is one among the author's most skillful achievements.

Kirpal, on the other hand, is a character who steps out of the norm, but in a way that challenges the family's ethos, as embodied in words and deeds of the father, a legacy the older son Jasjit naturally inherits. Kirpal's aspirations for class mobility and his disdain for the secular inclusiveness upheld by his family and their village of Aliwala grow in the cracks widened by British colonialism and the demands for Partition from the upper-class Muslim elite. It is interesting that the novel ends at the imminence of Partition, capturing its looming nightmares through a literal nightmare experienced by Jasjit about losing his friend Zulfi in the chaos of his forced displacement.

Though very readable, the novel occasionally lapses into phases of information-offload about the contextual history that feels less seamlessly integrated into the story telling. Devices such as letters, dreams, and self-reflective interiority are used to convey the story's context and historical background, fleshing out the plot, settings, and characters. However, at times, these elements take on a textbook-like tedium, possibly influenced by the readership that is imagined for the novel. While the global Indian and Western readers may be more aware of the contexts and incidents of the Partition of 1947, the pre-Partition involvement of the British Indian Army drawn in World War II, especially on the South East Asian front, is less widely known and requires more explanation.

The novel is certainly a good read for those interested in a narrative that recounts the events that led up to the Partition of Panjab from the perspective of a syncretic, non-sectarian farming village grappling with the seismic shifts underfoot. The rich description of the everyday life of the villagers of Aliwala - the smells, the taste, and the visual sensations of the fields; the winter fog; the arrival of spring; the monsoon rains; and the festivities of autumn, build and sustain a tense mood of anxious anticipation that the reader experiences throughout the novel. The novel is also worth reading for those who are interested in testimonies of love tested by time, as well as by the complex dynamics of closely knit families shaped by larger historical events beyond any individual's control. *The Song of Distant Bulbuls* serves as a metaphor for the lifelines of hope that sustain people through the act of waiting, an experience that, in one way or another, defines much of human life.