

Review of *An Obedient Father* by Akhil Sharma (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000), 282 p. (U.S.A. \$23, Canada \$37) ISBN: 0-374-10501-4.

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“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.”

With these lyrical lines begins Vladimir Nabokov’s celebrated novel *Lolita*. Like the object of desire in Nabokov’s novel, the “heroine” of Akhil Sharma’s *An Obedient Father* also has a name consisting of three syllables: Anita. (Or Ah. Nee. Ta. as Nabokov may have put it.) The similarities do not end there. Both books are written by immigrants, whose native tongue is not English, although in the case of Akhil Sharma, the book’s blurb informs us that he grew up in Edison, New Jersey. Both deal with obsession and incestuous relationships. But the similarities more or less end there. It is, of course, not fair to compare someone’s first novel to *Lolita*. But it is hard to read *An Obedient Father* without thinking of *Lolita*.

An Obedient Father is about Ram Karan, a corrupt official in the Delhi school system, and a man obsessed with sex, somewhat reminiscent of the protagonist of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Not content with frequenting prostitutes, he turns to his own daughter, Anita, a girl of 11 at that time, gradually moving from occasional brushing, to touching the more intimate parts, to masturbation, and finally to sex. Sharma seems to be in his element when describing these sexual escapades. Except for the very squeamish, most readers would probably find these sections morbidly fascinating.

Karan’s indiscretions with Anita come to an end when he is caught *flagrante delicto* by his wife, Radha. Instead of helping Anita with psychiatric treatment, Radha tells her not to tell anyone about what Karan did and to forget what happened. “From now on, you empty your head of everything that has happened. What happened wasn’t anything.” Anita, needless to say, grows up hating Karan. She gets married and begets a girl, Asha. And then in a twist of fate, her husband dies and Anita, not having studied past high school, is forced to come back to her father’s house, who by now is a widower. Karan is drawn towards Asha, who is only a little younger than Anita was when she was raped, in multiple ways. His interactions with Asha and Anita during this phase form a major chunk of the book.

A side-show in all this is Karan’s work as a bribe collector, initially for the Congress Party, but subsequently, when his boss decides to contest in the elections as a Bharatiya Janata Party candidate, for the BJP. Sharma offers occasional insights into how parties function and the politics of the elite and the middle class. An example is a stray thought about how Sikhs would perceive Hindus who were “so adaptable to the possibility of BJP

power.” That adaptability is an essential feature of the middle class in India’s reaction to the BJP. Suddenly we find that it is socially acceptable to talk about the “others” in derisive terms, to admit to wanting a “Hindu society”. Much of this has to do with elite insecurity in the face of increased social and political assertion on the part of marginalized groups and the uncertainties associated with economic liberalization. But Sharma does not explore these and so fails to paint a more compelling portrait of politics in modern India.

The book’s character depictions do not evoke any sympathy, let alone identification, with any of the personalities. With the exception of Karan, the others remind one of bad actors and actresses in a play that is not convincing. Sharma also tries hard to make the book “authentic” but in the process blunders on occasion. Two such blunders have to do with the Hindi film star Rajesh Khanna. In a scene from Karan’s youth is a snippet overheard in a brothel where someone says, “Dev Anand is much better than Rajesh Khanna.” And then in the next paragraph we are told that some years later Nehru died. Now, Nehru died in 1964 and Rajesh Khanna’s first film (*Aakhri Khat*) was released only in 1966. This anachronism is all the more painful because it is unnecessary and extraneous to the narrative. Similarly, many years later, when Rajesh Khanna is running for Parliament, we are told that after he married Dimple Kapadia, Rajesh Khanna retired from movies for 15 years. Again, during that period (1975-90), Rajesh Khanna appeared in over 50 movies. Such mistakes are jarring and detract from an otherwise readable book.

Both corruption and child molestation are major subjects, amenable to lengthy explorations. By not delving into either, Sharma’s book gives the sense of being an overgrown short story. Indeed, in an interview in *Publishers Weekly*, Sharma mentions that he had originally written one of the chapters as a short story. While creditable for a first novel, *An Obedient Father* does disappoint, partly because Sharma is clearly capable of much more.

The biggest failing of the book, however, is that it offers no solutions. Each character is condemned to his or her fate and they do not even try to escape from it, let alone struggle against it. And society, Indian society that is, is irremediably screwed up. The only course of action open is to get out. Illustrative of this prescription is the book’s conclusion, with Asha being adopted by her aunt Kusum, who lives in America, and flying there. For a book written by an Indian author residing in the U.S., that should not be too surprising. But it simply will not do. It is far more rewarding and fruitful to struggle; by removing that possibility from his characters, Sharma robs them of their dignity.