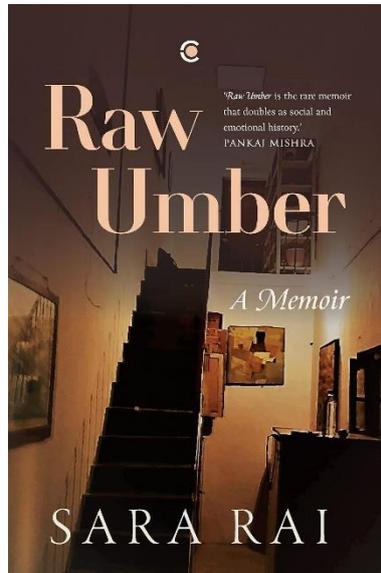


Bhanu P.* : Review of ‘Raw Umber: A Memoir’ by Sara Rai

***Raw Umber: A Memoir* by Sara Rai**

Westland Books (2021), ISBN: 978-9395767514, Pp 240, ₹ 699

Writer, translator and editor Sara Rai penned *Raw Umber* as a book of memoir. Sara Rai is the granddaughter of famous Hindi writer Munshi Premchand. Sara Rai was born into a family of writers and artists based in Allahabad. Sara Rai's grandfather is the writer Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, better known by his pen name Munshi Premchand. The book is in the form of autobiographical essays. The book is about the nature of remembering, and the role that memory plays in shaping a writer's sensibility. The first essay 'Palimpsest' is about her family home in Allahabad. She talks about people in her family who are no more around. She says they are "absent, they are still palpable". She goes on to describe objects that have become so important in her life that she doesn't wish to part away from them. She mostly talks about the "schizophrenic sixties" where she grew up.

She narrates how her grandparents had a lasting influence on her life. About her grandfather she says:

The air of our house was permeated with my grandfather's presence — his life of commitment to the underdog, his willingness for personal sacrifice for the larger good and his ideals.

Her grandmother Shivrani Devi was also important in moulding her character. Sara tells stories about the two families she was raised in, in mesmerizing prose. Towards

the end we have four stories included in the appendix. They are by her mother, aunt, grandmother, and Premchand, respectively.

What I liked about the book is that it is minimalist. It is not very wordy as one might expect from a memoir. The writing style is elegant. All the essays in the book were written over time. She puts together three generations of the father's family living under the shadow of one of the biggest names in Hindi fiction, Munshi Premchand. Her mother's Shia family lived in an ancient family mansion called Nawab ki Deorhi. These two homes in Allahabad and Benaras are the focal points between which Rai tells her life story.

The book paints a delicate portrait of Premchand. As a child of a Hindu father and Muslim mother, she was witness to the best of the two worlds. The book is an excellent read. It is an ode to memory, childhood and one's lineage.

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