

Review of *Everything the Light Touches* by Janice Pariat

Arpana Gurung

Asst. Professor, Department of English, Govt. Sanskrit College, Samdong, East Sikkim, India.

Mail Id: agurungsmv@gmail.com | Orcid - 0009-0002-5045-5903

Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: **Everything the Light Touches**

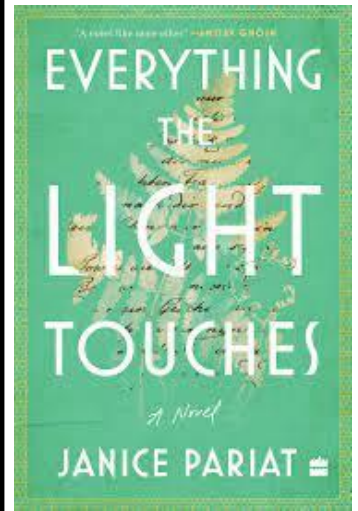
Author: **Janice Pariat**

Publisher: Harper Collins

Language: English

ISBN: 978-93-5629-139-3

Price: INR 799



Abstract

This review is a reflection on the latest novel by Janice Pariat *Everything The Light Touches* (2023), published by Harper Collins. The book is a work of fiction that tells the stories of four characters who are times and world apart yet the narrative has intricately woven them together through myths, legends, and a beautiful bond with botany.

Keywords: North-East, myth, legend, eco-criticism, identity

The novel is a historical fiction and is divided into seven parts between four characters where each character has a story of their own. The four characters are- Shai, Evelyn, Johann and Carl- the first two are fictional while Johann and Carl are Johann Von Goethe and Carl Linnaeus- both of them prominent figures in the study of botany. What is interesting is how each of these characters never intersect- their stories do not come together at any point in time as we follow through each of their individual journeys. The seven parts are named after the protagonist of that story- each character has a dedicated two part except for Carl who has one- and they are all told through different perspectives.

The first-person narrative for Shai, third person perspective for Evelyn and Johann while Carl's story is told through his diary entries while he was on his various journeys to find and classify plants across Europe.

As the novel opens with Shai's story, the reader is introduced to a woman who is on a journey home. Home here is Shillong, Meghalaya in the far North-East of India-an area that has of late come to be recognized as a homogenized whole, united by their geographical location for convenience's sake. Still evolving, still emerging and still highly debated in terms of culture, language, literature and the treatment meted out by what we know as mainland India. The story of Shai is written with an absolute sense of intimacy that can only be achieved by someone who has lived and breathed in a place to be familiar enough to write in such fluency- about its customs, its legends, its folklores, the myths that surrounds the hills of the wettest place on earth as well as the quirks that are unique to the place. From the very beginning, the plants, the trees and the forest - they take up space- the narrator describes them not just in passing but with a conscious and active attempt to make them more than mere bystanders in the narrative. From the character of Shai's father, who is actively engaged in "Growing plants and saving them, from frost and aphids and too much rain" (11), and now from human beings too. Pariat here poses as a critique on the rampant deforestation in the Himalayan region- however, what works is that the tone is not didactic but a general sort of commentary on the recent proceedings of a world which is grappling with capitalism on one hand and the growing environmental concerns on the other. The book can be read through the lense of eco-criticism to understand the hills and their relationship with the depleting forest and other natural resources. Throughout the novel, we find such commentary on contemporary issues -social, political as well as environmental and economic. The uranium mining and the health issues shrouded in mystery, the Khasi Students' Union, the agitation, the civil unrest on issues of "insider-outsider". Through Shai, we learn of the hills - seemingly calm but with an underbelly that is seething with unrest and uncertainty.

Shai's story is set in the present time but it does run parallel (not in terms of time but in ideology and the essence of a journey) with the stories of Evelyn, Johann and Carl. These characters and their stories make the readers reflect on the history, of the legends, of the myths- of the different stories of the people who believed in living the most sustainable life in harmony with nature, people who believed in taking only as much as was needed with no sense of owning, of proprietorship and no sense of making money out of nature. With the concept of "*Diengei*" as told in the legends and the folktales of the Khasi people- the tree that holds all tree, Pariat plays around with the ideas and the stories that are passed down from generation to generation via oral story-telling. This idea is then supplemented by Goethe's idea of a plant that encapsulates all plant forms- this is how the novel becomes whole because even when these characters never intersect- the ideas and the philosophy is what brings them all together- a connection that was not established through human bonds but with a passing down of

ideas, of stories and an innate desire to find, a curiosity to explore. That is how the characters and their stories merge together to create a beautiful painting- where each character may have been painted at separate points of times but they all fit together because they are bound by their shared love for plants, for botany and a fascination for things that held meaning that went beyond the realms of scientific temper. As Evie's character has this conversation with the *Nongiad* siblings on the importance of the "spoken word" how Evie is unable to grasp the concept of using words, using memory as the only tool to pass down customs, wisdom, advices and even contracts. "We give someone our word, we keep it. It is a matter of honour", (391) - says the *nongiad* sister Phyrnai to which Evie is visibly surprised. For her, a citizen of the British Empire, contracts and legal documents far outweigh the spoken word and she asks "what happens if one breaks the spoken word?" (391) to which the *Nongiad* sibling gives a simple answer which outweighs law and order and punishment- "You must live with yourself" (391). A simple way of life that desires nothing, harms no one and is based on the tenets of trust and generosity, like suggested by Goethe more than 100 years ago before this conversation happened- finding a more organic way of living, his quest for experiencing plants through knowing them in their honest simplicity - when they sprout, when they get the first leaf, when they upgrade to a stalk - their journey and not just scientific classification.

The narration is replete with Khasi words, casual mentions flowing out in actual conversations, and in the songs of the "*nong knia*". Whether Pariat does it intentionally- making the readers work for the meaning, as a tribute to her own roots- her Khasi heritage or simply making use of her artistic liberties without second thoughts- in any case it makes the novel come alive in its narration. By the end of it, I could feel some words rolling out of my mouth as I repeated them to listen what they sounded like to me. "*U Blei, Kumno? Khublei*" -words so alien in my mouth yet with a hint of familiarity that comes not from knowing someone but from hearing about them. As Shai tries to navigate her journey back home, we sense a woman who is confused about her identity as a Khasi. As one shop keeper asks her "Phi dei Khasi?" and she replies with a "Hoooid, yes, I am Khasi" (36), but what exactly does it mean to be Khasi- to be able to speak a language? To belong to a certain place? Or to belong to a specific race? Is it technical? Or are the distinctions arbitrary- we feel Shai asking these questions as she grapples with her own relationships with her home town, with her state, and her current situation as someone who belongs to the hills but has found a place in the plains. A question that plagues thousands of young individuals from the North-East who venture out for better education and better professional opportunities- where do we belong? Pariat, toys with this idea but of course, as readers we are allowed to make our own interpretations because as a story-teller she does not direct or dictate instead she nudges and she strokes, fueling curiosity, emboldening us to venture to seek our own adventures.

As a novel of 491 pages in total, it does touch on many subjects, we find commentary on imperialism, on religion, on Christianity and Christian missionaries who transformed the religious traditions of

the hills. Pariat has also gently shown us a comparison between the British regime with imperialist designs, keen to exploit and rule over distant lands against the *nongiads* - people who have nothing to own, nothing to gain except live freely as people of the earth, caretakers and guardians of our forests, valleys and rivers. The stories of Johann and Carl are brimming with botanical insights, philosophies and Goethe's very interesting views on life in general. With Evie's character she weaves the story of India under imperialist regime and brings back the history of the region, the explorations, the exploitations and the vast changes that occurred as a result of the 200 years of British occupancy. But the one prominent thread that runs the brightest is that of a journey, a journey of self-discovery lies at the core of the novel- Shai, Evelyn, Johann, Carl- all of them are shown as constantly moving, even their thoughts run like wild horses chasing the unseen. Pariat has managed to capture the history of the Shillong hills through the eyes of her characters who arrive there at different points in time- some as strangers while who have returned as strangers.

This essence- of a journey, of how human beings are not stationary beings, of how they are constantly moving, evolving, becoming- has been captured by Pariat in a tone that made me ponder on the possibilities that lie beyond our comfort zone. A lesson from the *nongiads*, nomads that used to run freely across the mountains and the valleys- foraging, collecting, conserving and never taking more than is necessary- this way of living - even if not possible today- but an inspiration to start living sustainably, by leaving nature as is and only using as much as is needed.

Pariat's novel has its base in the Himalayan region of the Khasi hills in North Eastern India but it also brings together the worlds of Goethe and Carl Linnaeus lending it a much Universal tone. The novelist combines history, botany, travel -a blend of fact and fiction that completes the book with magic realism as a narrative technique. The groundwork and the research required to make it so detailed definitely comes across to the reader as we hold this book in hand. It does touch upon a lot of subjects like the commentary on socio-political realities, environmental concerns as well as the strained relationship with its mother nation- India- it does stand a bit scattered owing to this but as a novel, there is a thematic unity in the ideas of identity and journey of self-discovery. However, this novel from Pariat will be helpful for scholars studying the many areas of the North-East within India- studying the many issues that surround its debated genealogy, it presents a nice backdrop for other works to be read and related to. Pariat has managed to create a phenomenal novel that will be a great contribution to Indian English literature in general.

Author Bio:

Arpana Gurung: Arpana Gurung has completed her Bachelors in English Literature from Calcutta University, and her Masters from Sikkim University. At present, she is working as an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of English at Government Sanskrit College Samdong, in east Sikkim. Her area of interest is the North-East (of India) and the many facets of literature emerging from the region.