

Book Review

Anita Shreve, *The Stars Are Fire*. London: Little, Brown, 2017, 322 pp., ISBN: 978 0 349 12358 5.

The Stars Are Fire by Anita Shreve is a story of a woman who represents the evolution of American women after World War II. Grace Holland is a living portrait of the predicament of the post-war American women. The life of Grace is set against the backdrop of 47's fire in Maine. 'In a Spring of no spring' Grace, 'never been Gracie' finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage with two toddlers and one yet to come to this dry world where the 'last beautiful afternoon' has been long gone.

This is a rainy spring that never brings bliss rather logs the flow of Grace's life. Grace feels waterlogged and groans to get back the happy life she once had before her marriage. Gene, the machine husband, treats her only to be an instrument of child –breeding and makes a sexual relation with her from which she never gets 'the God-awful-joy' that Rosie, her next-door neighbor, speaks of as her marriage bed has turned to be a field of child-production.

The Stars Are Fire is the journey of a 23-year-old young mother in quest of independence which she gets eventually. The journey is a perilous one but the gain is a good bargain. Shreve sanctifies Grace by the wildfire from which she emerges like a Phoenix from its own ashes.

During the wildfire Gene, 'deeply troubled', is reported to walk into a wall of flames. The question of his fate remains open for much of the book which says little of his wife's desire to find him back. Grace is left homeless, as are other 25,000 Mainers after October, 1947 but gains the freedom to pursue a career and a future romantic prospect which was absent earlier in her life. That's how Shreve upholds the freedom of a lone woman against this androgenic world where she is caught into things with a little hope to come out. But Grace does away with her barriers hardly taking any help from a man's heel-unless a better man shows up, first to help than to woo. *In The Pilot's Wife* by the same author, a woman comes to know the death of her adulterous husband from a man who latterly becomes her lover. As well in *The Stars Are Fire*, Grace is greatly helped by a doctor. Later on she meets a pianist, Aiden, who, post-fire, roves about her recently deceased mother-in-law's house. She invites him to be a renter at that house and eventually seeks happiness in his arms which she fails to get from Gene. She finds freedom in the closet of her deceased mother-in-law. Grace buys a Buick selling a jewelry from her casket which is a physical symbol of her newfound freedom in the wake of the fire.

Gene shows up suddenly when the reader along with Grace has already lost hope of his coming home back. His step into the life of Grace for the second time is, to her, like a thunderbolt out of nowhere as she loses all interest in him

and learns to row on her own. Towards the close of the novel we find Grace succeeds to grace her own life. She settles in Nova Scotia during the summer of 1948 and this summer is going to be the happiest one she has ever had. She takes photography for her profession and inaugurates the foundation of her independence. At last we have Grace with Aiden's 'grip on her wrist is fierce.' She triumphs over the fire, over Gene and undoubtedly over the dead relationship with her husband and patriarchy.

This novel is a saga of a woman's coming-of-age through a catastrophic journey. Here, Shreve gives birth to another Pi (*Life of Pi* by Yann Martel) but, this time, to tame an invisible power not a large, unpredictable tiger. While doing so she leaves no single details. The shrew (unhappy wedlock, patriarchy.....) is tamed through faith and mental strength not through bodily power. The novelist demonstrates a dutiful wife, a loving mother who, with stoicism and courage, overcomes devastating loss and, through the smoke, is able to glimpse the opportunity to rewrite her own story. Grace is an *every-woman* who pines to break the shackles imposed upon her.

Anita Shreve has a captivating quality to engage her readers. The selection of names for her characters is appropriate as well the titles to the several sections of the novel. The characters (Grace, Gene, Rosie.....) act according to their respective names. The allegorical citation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*FI*, 1623) before the start of the novel promptly forces the reader to go into deliberation immediately. As one reads one becomes thirstier to learn more about what happens next to Grace. And the author succeeds in meeting that growing thirst though leaves the reader brooding over it even at least for 24 hours after the end of this masterpiece as if the reader has been dreaming till now.

Ummey Haney Pinkey
Lecturer, Department of English
Chittagong Independent University
Chattogram, Bangladesh
Email: pinkey@ciu.edu.bd