

## Book Review: The Sackclothman by Jayasree Kalathil

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The Sackclothman is a simple and sensitive story through which the author has touched upon how children and adults experience loneliness, anxiety and sadness following some trauma or grief. Both adults and children may go through the same pain but react differently. In the adult's world it is often assumed that children are not deeply affected by grief. They find it easy to move on and live happily. They are expected to return to normalcy sooner than the adults.

The book presents a heart touching account of the feelings of an eleven-year-old girl, Anu who lost her elder sister. After her death, her mother gets depressed and is unable to focus on the daily household chores and pay attention to Anu. Even though Anu wished to engage with her mother in doing the usual activities, no one in the family understands that such a young girl can help her mother in coming out of her depression. Anu's father also comes home late and is often drunk. Anu not only misses her elder sister but also misses the love and affection from her parents. The school has also become a sad place for Anu as she hates to listen to the whispers about her family. She often feels that no one would understand her feelings and there is no point in sharing them with anyone. Some of the lines in the book are so simple yet very powerful in expressing her state of mind. For instance, on the last day of school the teacher asked her, "Looking forward to your holidays Anu". She replies, "Yes". But deep inside she felt very anxious and sad as she has no plans for holidays. She would miss her elder sister badly as this would be her first holiday without her. While other friends may be visiting their relatives, she can't even do that. She would be lonely and at home also would miss the positivity. Anu thinks that there is no point telling the teacher how she felt as she would only pity her.

Children feel that no one would understand their pain and thus, suffer in silence. The value of emotions cannot be overemphasized. Most experiences of children in school do not focus on the emotional aspects of the child's life. Oftentimes, teachers and other adults do not forge deep emotional bonds with children. The pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes also do not focus on training the teacher to 'listen' to children. In our school system, these responsibilities of talking to

children deeply are relegated to specialists, or the counsellors. There are hardly any counsellors available, more so in the rural areas. Some children who've experienced loss or bereavement, or suffered abuse find no recluse in the school system.

The book also presents an interesting aspect of life that is 'being stuck' through the story book that Anu is writing. Even though the heroine of her story book has magical powers, she has nothing much to do with those powers. Through this story, the author has perhaps depicted Anu's state of mind also.

Another central character of the story is Chaakupranthan. His actual name is Narayanan but no one knows him by this name. He has no home and takes shelter in the post office veranda. People in the neighbourhood provide him food but no one talks to him. When Anu started talking to him she realized that Chaakuranthan had a son and he missed him badly. Anu wanted to know more about him but she was always advised by his father to stay away from him and even provide food from a distance. Infact, at one occasion Anu's uncle, Raghu Maman said that it is 'shameful' that Chaakupranthan is allowed to wander freely without the people in society doing anything about it. The mentally ill persons are rendered nameless and relegated to the margins of society.

Through Chaakuprntahan, the author has highlighted certain social stereotypes about depression and being normal. He is treated as insane and people ask their children to stay away from him. He is forced to shave his head and go to a mental hospital. The loss of identity through a new name provided by people, forcefully shaving the head and sending him to mental hospital all symbolize how people lose their identity while going through depression.

The book has some illustrations which may be Anu's drawings in her diary. The illustrations represent various emotions like fear, loneliness, happiness and sadness that Anu may be going through. Some sketches are almost blank with just random lines representing how sometimes one may experience a state of blankness.

In the end the book provides hope when Anu's mother suddenly realizes how Anu is also

suffering. When she gets a fever quite similar to her elder sister, perhaps it triggers her emotions. Her father also brings her favourite sweets and shows affection. In her dream, Sajichechi, the elder sister paints her toenails blue and plays hide and seek with her but Anu can't find her. Anu seems to have finally come to terms with her loss in her life.

Chaakupranthan also ran away from the mental hospital. The heroine Daisy also gets back her magical powers. All of these symbolically represent that depression and other mental illnesses could be treated and there is always a place for hope in life.

There are not many books on the theme of childhood and depression. It has been felt often that children need to be protected from these harsh realities of life viz. mental illness, death. However, these realities do exist in children's lives. By not acknowledging them, we've done a disservice to children and the families, by imposing a norm of a 'happy' family. Children's literature on this theme is rare and very welcome.

The story of a young girl grappling with alcoholism of her father, the loss of her sister, depression of her mother and her intrigue with the strange man with mental illness, needs to be engaged with in every school classroom in this country. It is a useful and sensitive addition to any children's library or teacher's resource room as it navigates the difficult terrain of alcoholism, bereavement and depression. By bringing specific issues like psychological illness and mental illness, teachers can be responsive to the particular circumstances of children in their classroom.