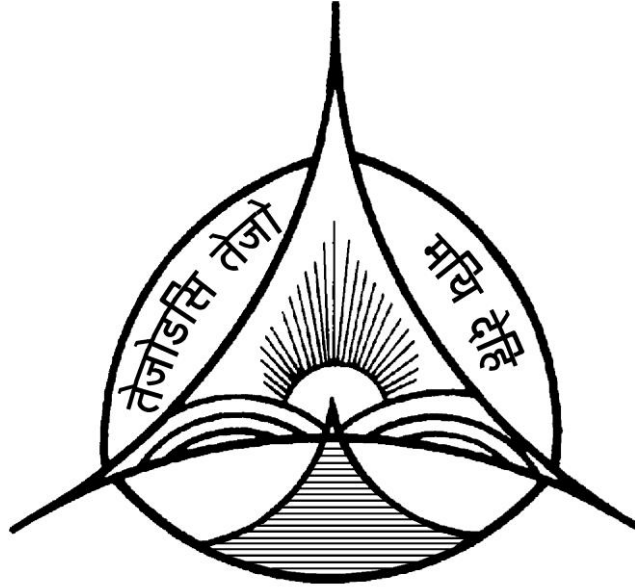


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*The Devil Take Love* by Sudhir Kakar, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2015

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Well-known psychoanalyst and writer, Sudhir Kakar, is, by now, an old hand at writing novels, and in his latest offering, he covers familiar ground. Like his earlier novels, *The Devil Take Love*, too, revisits Kakar's longstanding preoccupations with the themes of love, desire and renunciation in classical Indian literary, religious and philosophical traditions as a way to make sense of their relevance and afterlife in modern India. Its dust jacket promises a captivating journey back into the past, where 'under the shadow of imminent death, a great poet reflects on the journey of his life, and the ceaseless conflict between morality and desire.' Does the novel live up to its promise?

Set in 7th century Ujjayini, "the most powerful city of the ancient world" and the capital of Avanti, Kakar's book is a first-person recounting of the extraordinary highs and lows of the life of Bhartrihari, who, we are told, at the height of his fame was compared "to the master poet, the divine Kalidasa himself." Historically, not much is known about Bhartrihari and the jury is still out on whether the grammarian who famously expounded the *sphota* theory, among others, is the same one who wrote the *Satakatraya*—a collection of epigrammatic poems around the themes of *niti*, *sringara* and *vairagya*. Kakar uses his creative license to settle the issue and drive a clear wedge between the grammarian and the poet. In the novel, the poet is named after the grammarian, and consciously rebels against the legacy of his namesake. "Like most poets," Bhartrihari in *The Devil Take Love* tells us, "I have a deep dislike for grammarians. They are but weeds in the garden of literature in which we poets are fugacious blossoms."

Kakar's novel operates in flashback mode. It opens with a disheartened Bhartrihari certain that he only has a few more days of freedom and perhaps even life left at his disposal, before he is thrown into prison forever, or worse, by royal decree. He feels impelled to chronicle his life story, not only to offer a cautionary tale for others, or to prevent his detractors from wresting control of his narrative and gleefully distorting it for posterity with slander and lies, but to come to terms with his imminent downfall and disgrace "without self-serving evasions." Convinced that the only way he can "reclaim my soul" is by "expos[ing] the sludge of my desires to the cleansing fire of truth," Bhartrihari proceeds to write an unvarnished account of his life right up to the critical conjuncture at which we find him when the novel opens.

The pages that follow touch upon Bhartrihari's childhood years in provincial Jalandhar, his education in poetics with the pedantic Jagannatha, and his adolescent infatuation with a teenage cousin. Bhartrihari's extraordinary skills as a poet, we are told, are evident very early, and confident of his talents, Bhartrihari soon sets out for Ujjayini to try his fortune. In Ujjayini, he

quickly comes to the notice of the sybaritic prince, Vikramsen, by winning the city's annual poetry contest. Subsequently, on the latter's ascension to the throne, Bhartrihari becomes the poet laureate of the court and part of the inner circle of the hedonistic ruler of Ujjayini. For a few years, Bhartrihari laps up the adulation at court and lives lavishly, cavorting with courtesans and indulging his sensual appetites. His enthusiasm for this lifestyle does not sustain however, and over time his relations with the moody, voluptuary, Vikramsen becomes strained. Meanwhile, we are told of Bhartrihari's philosophical turn, his growing awareness of the ephemerality of life, his marriage in middle age to Anangasena, a *ganika*, and the gradual dissolution of that marriage through adulterous relations that both have with others. Finally, we are told of Bhartrihari's inappropriate behaviour with the king's daughter when he is engaged as her tutor. It is this last, which Bhartrihari fears will spell his doom when the novel begins. The novel ends with a lonely Bhartrihari castigating his life's shallow pursuits in verse and prose, and morosely "await[ing] death's imminent call."

*The Devil Take Love* has all the trappings of a good read. The novel is attractively designed and packaged. Its title is irreverent and catchy. The subject matter deals with the place and function of eros and morality or aesthetics and ethics in life. The novel is peopled with gifted poets, sensualist kings, beautiful courtesans, among others. And the backdrop is a bustling cosmopolitan ancient city where Shiva, "the erotic ascetic" and Kama, the God of Love, Shiva reduced to cinders and later resurrected as Ananga, both, hold sway. A heady mix, by all accounts, to spin a wickedly good yarn. Unfortunately, the novel does not always deliver on this promise.

Sudhir Kakar cannot be faulted on his research for *The Devil Take Love*. The novel does a deft job of interlacing historical fact with fiction to provide a broad-brushed picture of the mores and customs of a thriving Ujjayini in ancient times. The care in the details of the protagonist's characterisation and the subtle and not so subtle cross-referencing in the novel make *The Devil Take Love* a culturally dense text that rewards attentive reading. Kakar's ambition to imaginatively reconstruct the historically elusive character and career of Bhartrihari is also laudable. But that's as far as the accolades go.

Ultimately, *The Devil Take Love* is not a riveting read. While its vision is grand, the translation on paper remains pedestrian. Most of the characters in the novel are undeveloped, flat and even more damningly, uninteresting. They have an instrumental presence in the novel—to offer an alibi for the protagonist's in/actions and pontifications. Even Bhartrihari, the protagonist, whose voice and presence dominate the novel, is disappointingly predictable and stuffy, to the end. Kakar also commits the cardinal sin of "telling" much more than "showing." This drains the novel of much of its dramatic impact and affective nuance. In the final analysis, *The Devil Take Love* suffers from a lack of vitality in expression and imagination. Its language is ponderous and the overall articulation bland. This is a serious disservice to what could have been.