Fatal promise of immortality

Amin Malouf, *The First Century After Beatrice*, Abacus, London, 1998, pp.198, $6.99

Pre-natal sex diagnostic tests are increasingly available, and a section of the medical profession, which supplies these services, argues that they reflect society's values and are merely meeting women's demands. In this context, Amin Malouf's novel should be made essential reading for all medical professionals.

A French entomologist attending an academic conference in Egypt hears of the widespread sale of the scarab beetle which is worshipped there with the incantation: "May your name live for ever and a son be born to you." He dismisses this as quaint, but his journalist companion, Clarence, on a visit to India is told by a guard at one of Mumbai's fancy new hospitals that it is "blessed by heaven, since nearly all babies born here are boys". The doctors refuse to talk to her. But as the skewing of sex ratios starts showing in other countries as well, Clarence discovers that it is not the scarab beetle but an efficacious new 'substance' that is being used.

The West is sanguine. A prominent editor, reflecting the views of policy makers, doctors and demographers, argues: "There are over-populated countries which can no longer manage to feed themselves, their governments have tried all sorts of ways of controlling the demographic explosion, with limited results, and sometimes none at all. If a method could be found to reduce the birth rate without violence, without force, with the free consent of parents….in what way would it be criminal or scandalous… Mankind would finally be ripe to enter the new millenium without violence, famine, barbarism."(p80).

The inventor of the 'substance' argues that "it is in the nature of every drug to be beneficial if utilized judiciously and dangerous in the contrary case". He takes over small pharmaceutical companies in Third World countries to manufacture and market the new product. Governments in these countries turn a complicitous blind eye.

A scientist friend of the entomologist points out that with the unbridled growth of the reproductive medical industry, research on sex-selective vaccines may soon be under way. The cult of the male, he warns, that today is simply a defect of society, would soon lead to collective suicide. Sex selection, a moral dilemma for doctors and parents, is justified on the grounds of a woman's right to choose. Science, it is argued, is thus an instrument of freedom; amoral, value-free. How then is science to be imbued with morality? They decide to set up a Network of Sages to warn of the appalling consequences of the irresponsible manipulation of the human species.

Soon, however, riots erupt in several countries; villagers ransack health centres accusing the authorities of attempting to diminish the population of their community, their ethnic group. No one wants to admit that the quest for sons, for immortality, is leading people in their community to utilise the substance. Governments respond by banning the publication of demographic statistics.

The West remains reassured by opinion polls concluding that sex preference is not an issue for their populations. Surveys show that 68 per cent of the population has no explicit sex preference; 16 per cent prefer boys and 16 per cent prefer girls. The problem arises when the 16 per cent preferring boys all have boys, while the rest have a normal distribution.

An American woman, who had used the 'substance' to bear a son and now wants a daughter, discovers that the effects are irreversible. She files a suit against the drug company and is soon joined by others. Feminists, pro-lifers and the Church come together in an uneasy alliance to demand a ban.

The governments bans the 'substance', and research is undertaken to reverse the effects of its use. Tax benefits are announced on the birth of a daughter. Legislation is introduced to give daughters their matronymic names to fight 'male heirism' The entomologist and his partner are themselves blessed by a daughter, Beatrice.

It might have been supposed that because of their increasing rarity, women would have been honoured. Instead they are the precious property of their tribes, prizes fought over in bloody quarrels. They cannot walk in the streets for fear of rape and kidnap, old and familiar ethnic responses. Police have to guard hospitals to prevent the kidnap and sale of baby girls.

In country after country as populations see their survival threatened, ethnic wars erupt. Northern countries close their embassies, their businesses, take their money and flee. Suddenly "the planet had clearly shrunk, shriveled, like a diseased or over-ripe apple; century-old lines of exchange were brutally snapped" (p.183).

Hatred is contagious, and so too can retrogression be. There can be salvation for the whole planet, or none at all. Malouf's novel is a plea for a return to rationality, pointing to a community's infinite capacity to regress, as well as the universal values of human life that concocted tradition and ethnicity can trample over.

Malouf's *Samarkhand*, on the death of science shrouded in the politics of religion, is eerily macabre to Indians today. The *Century After Beatrice* presents us with equally apocalyptic implications.

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(A slightly different version of this review was published in the Journal of the Indian Medical Association, Volume 100, No. 1, January 2002.)

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