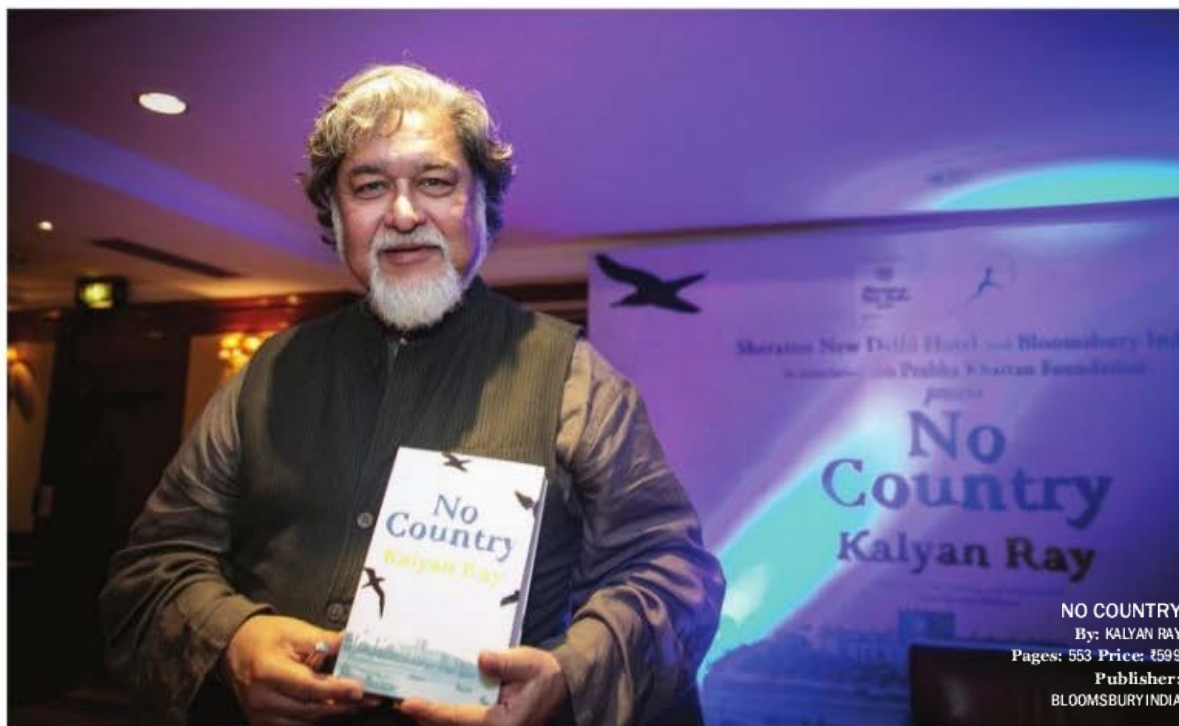


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BOOKS

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NO COUNTRY
 By: KALYAN RAY
 Pages: 553 Price: ₹599
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NOT AN EASY JOURNEY Across Continents

A tough read populated with multiple characters and narratives, Kalyan Ray's oceanic novel is saved by the quality of its prose. By **SURESH KOHLI**

I stare in consternation at my proud and lovely daughter, who is flushed, on the point of tears, her plate untouched. I wish Seethe were here with us, but she had been called away to the hospital; babies are born even on Thanksgiving." And it is a baby who young adult Padraiz unconsciously leaves behind, in 1843, when he embarks on a timeless, nameless destination in a tiny Ireland village on the verge of near starvation, followed by friend Brendan who

has to foster father the girl. While Padraiz heads on a merchant ship towards Calcutta, Brendan following him with his daughter and a schoolteacher lands up in the US.

A tough read like many other classical 18th century, early 19th century narratives in terms of range, reach, style and crowded with characters uncharted by any time frame, it is certainly not a page turner but also ponderously paced action/reaction that spans Ireland, Canada, Italy, India and

the US (and so many cities peopled both by familiar and passing characters to follow to begin with). And, interestingly, every character introduced in the novel is on some sort of a journey: internal and external. At another level it is an unending search for roots, home, belonging and chasing personal histories.

And the huge cast of characters fills up almost 550 pages, beginning with the present that is Friday, November 25, 1989, Clairmont, Upstate New York titled

'Chief Sandor Zulloff' and ending up at the same time and place in Devika Mitra's house.

While with so many narrators eager to spell out personal histories that are tedious, irritatingly repetitive, the novel does end with a certain staid manner when the two branches meet through family portraits, papers and incomplete narratives in New York. But the novel actually ends in Calcutta with the opening of a letter from Ramkumar (one of the many characters). "Mr Aherne was laying the pages one by one on the picture of the old mansion. The sheets looked frail and aged, and the black ink of the script on the brittle paper showed edges of red...From now on you and Neel are going to be the keeper of this letter...He sat back, looking at us, letting the stories of his life flow into ours. I imagined our families gathering in the shadows, unseen but present all around us."

Whether consciously, deliber-

ately Ray deploys language, from dull dreary to lyrical depending on the individual or situations, and is most effective when it is in simply narrative mode. And this lyricism suddenly invades with raising goose pimple effect. For instance, Marie Aherne, Padraig's mother, contemplating, in 1846: "But here comes Death, this untimely visitor who touches my fingers, then my blue-black wrist, ruffles my life's blood flow, and pulls me down by my strong and impulsive right hand." While there is a visible element of the effeminate discernible in the limpid flow, death by itself, or the invisible messenger, assumes a masculine form. Death in the novel is not simply a metaphor, but a living constant presence.

Then there is a sea of characters, like other constants of life that one has to shift back and forth to link the past with the present for there wouldn't be without tossing up Maire, Brendan, Padraig in particular, especially when the surnames rather than first names get tossed up—Maire is also Mrs Atherne and Miss Finnegan to single out a specific character thus leading the reader down the garden path.

It is not that the narrative is without its share of blemishes, or irritants. Space constraints disallow dealing with them even in passing lest they lead to a chain reaction. For instance, the reader is with Brendan in 1846 and we have the opening line of a sub-chapter: "Famine fever made its appearance now, all over the starving countries" at a time when news about an adjoining village 30 miles away was a distant cry. But what saves it all is the quality of prose.

The novel is oceanic in its range and inhabitants, in life as well as in memory recalled at convenience cutting across time spans that embrace living and recalled, contemporary and distant. The narrative is fragmented as well as a continuous whole, spanning two centuries knitted together with lineages that break the barriers of time. One certainly needs infinite patience, jumping back and forth in memory to enter the timeframe or place a character in a given setting.



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