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BOOK REVIEW

‘Termite Fry’ confronts the reality of Adivasi life and the ongoing struggles of the community

The novel both stuns and saddens: the Adivasis’ great confidence in their environment wins your respect, but their vulnerability outside it is heartbreaking.

Veeksha Vagmita

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Hi by

Zai Whitaker's novel [*Termite Fry*](#) is written with simplicity and restraint. There's no dearth of action in the book, what with hordes of termites being scooped up into bags and venomous snakes being hunted with superb tact. Despite that, the novel is a confrontation with reality rather than a wild escape from familiar terrain. The book takes a gritty look at the lives of Adivasis and their constant challenges and anxieties.

The hunter and the hunted

When I picked up the book, I wasn't sure it was an offering I would relish. The title piqued my curiosity but didn't whet my appetite. The book, however, got hold of me and catapulted me into the world of the Irular tribe. Without a murmur of complaint or a whimper of fear, these Adivasis traverse and embrace a perilous landscape, that is, the low hills of the Eastern Ghats. You are awed by their dauntless spirit and fund of traditional knowledge. They have herbal vaccines for snakebites; they can pluck out medicinal plants; they know what preservatives to apply to snakeskin. But most importantly, they know the importance of every bird and animal – all of whom the Irular refer to as “people”.

Though dwelling in the wilderness has exposed them to the harsh aspects of nature, they sustain themselves without losing respect for other creatures. Hunting, unfortunately, is a dire necessity. To their credit, the Irular never treat it as a sport. Though hunting a snake is an activity fraught with danger – the most intrepid snake catchers can be bitten by a swiftly charging “person” – a thought is spared for the agony of the reptile. The show of humanity in the midst of a nerve-wracking pursuit captures the complex relationship between nature and the Irular, the hunted and the hunter:

Still holding the tail with his left hand, [Thatha] guided the stick along the body until he could pin the head to the ground and grab it behind the neck. One neat, clean operation. But now, knowing the next one was his, it didn't seem so easy to Mari...“I'll hold the tail and body for you this time, just grab the neck and front body. Remember, one strong movement downwards. Don't want it to hurt.”

The meticulous procedure for capturing a snake is a knowledge that has clearly been honed over generations, passed down from grandfather to grandson as the secrets of the “profession”. The swiftness and fluidity of the Irular hunters' movements, their adroit handling of blindingly fast creatures, and their razor-sharp reflexes and remarkable composure under pressure transform their seemingly primitive skills into nothing less than an art form:

“Somberi pambu,” laughed Thatha. “Lazy snake.”

The snake decided to prove him wrong and shot out of the bag, so quickly that Thatha had to do a swift number with his legs and hands to avoid a bite and grab the tail before it made off. ...It hissed with all its might, the ribs expanding and collapsing with each agitated breath. ...

“Definitely not a happy person,” Thatha chuckled as he circled the snake to tire it out.

While the bravery of the hunters is admirable, it is Thenee’s agile mind, keen observation, and resolute will that left a deep impression on me. Thenee is a precocious young girl, zealously offering instructions to her elders, who treat her childish directives with indulgence. You can’t help admiring her growing initiative, which is fuelled by her concern for her people. Being illiterate, the Irular are routinely cheated by cunning agents and middlemen to whom they sell snakeskins and medicinal plants:

Thatha was struggling with that familiar misery of feeling cheated but not being able to prove anything. “That python alone, it’s so big, and someone told me that for a similar one, he had got...I mean, I’m not saying anything, but...”

The dealer mimicked him, one of the worst forms of insult in Tamil culture. “I’m not saying anything, I’m not saying anything.” Mari couldn’t breathe from the shock. To watch Thatha, his God, everybody’s God, being humiliated was hard to bear.

Whitaker reveals how the Irular people, though untrained in the ways of the world, have the innate ability to sense deception – even if they try to keep their emotions locked inside their wounded hearts. Thenee, aware that hostility awaits her, eventually musters the courage to visit a nearby school alone. She is lucky enough to make the visit on Adivasi Day, an annual day announced by the Tamil Nadu government.

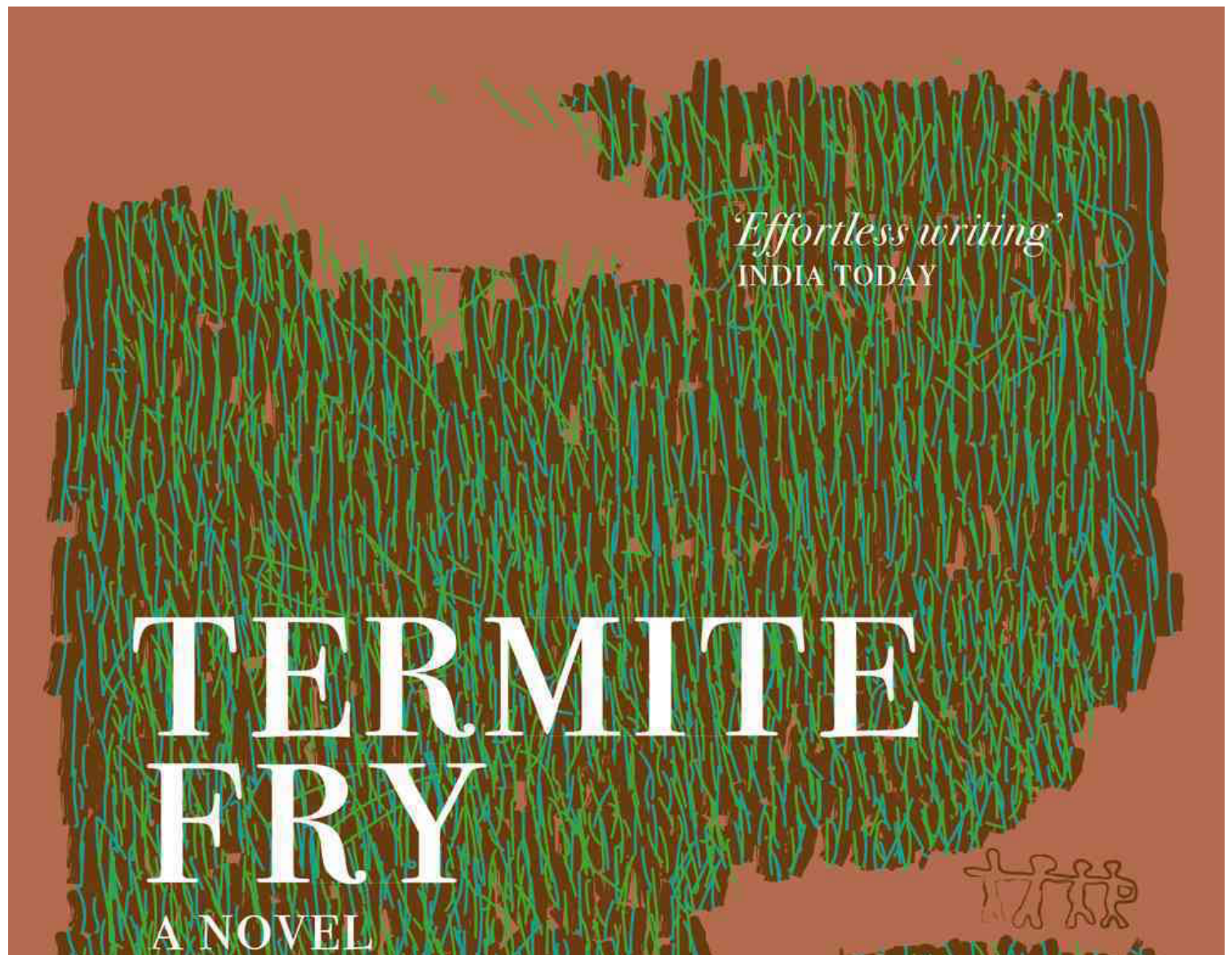
Naturally, she is welcomed with open arms and easily gets admission. In the first few days, Thenee wants to learn from her math teacher how to read the numbers on a weighing scale. She clearly wants to prevent her community from being cheated when selling items by weight.

The Irular people are dealt a serious blow when the government bans the trade of snakeskin. For generations,

the Irular relied on the snakeskin business to sustain themselves, even in the face of constant uncertainty and adversity. The loss of their mainstay leaves them in a terrible predicament. However, hope is rekindled when the Wildlife (Protection) Act is implemented shortly after the ban. Special licences are offered to the Irular people to legally gather and sell items such as snake venom, which is used to create antivenom.

The Irular are well-equipped to take advantage of this opportunity, possessing deep knowledge of the forest and its resources. They are, however, targeted by an unscrupulous middleman who wants to use their expertise for his own benefit. The sweet talk of this swindler is meant to sway the simple-minded Adivasis. Thenee, the little girl with fierce determination, turns out to be a beacon for her community. By finding a way to outsmart the greedy man, she protects her community from falling into his clutches.


The book both stuns and saddens you: the Adivasis' amazing confidence in their environment wins your respect, but their vulnerability outside it breaks your heart. In the forest, the Irular people deftly handle stealthy snakes and swarms of termites. Since the Adivasis lack formal education, they become easy targets for exploitation. By immersing us in their world, Whitaker's novel becomes a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles of marginalised communities. She, however, reveals the possibilities embodied by a figure like Thenee. As the book ends, Thenee's father marvels at what a girl his daughter is. You share his wonder and his hope.



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