

Cash trapped

Shivani Sibal's new book, *MOMS*, is a sharply-observed social commentary on the lives of the rich

BY ANJULY MATHAI

We are all familiar with the woman of leisure—if not personally, then at least through movies and reality shows like *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives*. She walks with a swagger, her Christian Louboutin stilettos rhythmically click-clacking on the floor. She is perfectly put-together with not a hair out of place and nary a wrinkle on her embellished tulle dress. She air-kisses her friends when she meets them and calls them 'dah-ling'. She knows exactly what to order from the wine list. Her lifestyle is fantastically exotic, with babymoons to the Maldives and tennis lessons at the country club. But apart from her regular salon appointments and gym workouts in colour-coordinated outfits, no one really knows what she does on a daily basis.

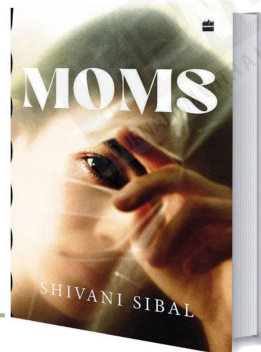
This, in short, is the life of Radhika Khanna in Shivani Sibal's latest book *MOMS*. From afar, her life looks perfect—with a rich and handsome husband, a beautiful pre-teen daughter and servants who have servants under them. But look closer and the cracks begin to appear. Her husband Manik, for example, wants her to be the 'best version of herself'. He won't allow her to gain weight. He has pages of handwritten rules locked away in a safe, with crimes and corresponding punishments. He hates greasy hair, so Radhika's punishment for not washing it, for example, is that he will snip a lock from the under-layers of her mane. The reward for an act of obedience is a piece of jewellery, "the

value meticulously tied to the effort or pain she had endured".

MOMS is a sharply-observed critique of the lives of the uber-wealthy. In fact, it is more social commentary than fiction. We might be far removed from this world, but we are familiar with all the characters. There is the socialite mother who spends her days playing bridge and is always trailed by her Chanel No.5 fragrance. The workaholic lawyer husband with enough "cerebral bandwidth" to carry on a conversation at a party while his mind is on the merits and demerits of a petition. The neighbourhood yoga teacher who is friendly with all the ladies but not really friends with them because she is not wealthy enough to belong in their circles.

Sibal prevents these characters from turning into stereotypes by adding a level of detail that makes the reader feel that we know the mechanics of how this world functions, even though it is very far from our own. Perhaps, in a small way, it is because we, too, are driven by the

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MOMS

Author: Shivani Sibal

Published by HarperCollins

Price ₹599; pages 248

same motivations. No, I don't have a wardrobe full of mink coats or a bedroom with automated blinds that allow me to sleep in as late as I want. Still, I know what it feels like to be insecure about your appearance, to be judgmental and look down on someone you feel is lesser than you, to think you are happy when you're not, to mask the scowl in your heart with a smile on your face.

The novel takes a radical turn in the second half, when the perspective shifts from Radhika to Manik. I liked it better because you get a glimpse into the mind of the big, bad husband and realise it is not all bad. Sibal adds nuance to his character so that ultimately, it reinforces your belief that there are no bad people; there are only people who do bad things. Also, in the latter half, another interesting factor is introduced in the story—grief. Ultimately, grief is the great equaliser; it pays no attention to the Lamborghinis in your garage.

Other than a rather abrupt ending, *MOMS* is an incisive look at the inner workings of the rich. Surprisingly, we relate to it because high society, as Sibal shows us, is just regular society in high definition. ●