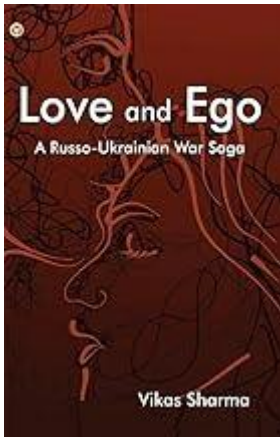


## Book Review By Dr. Jagdish Batra



### *Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga*

Author: Vikas Sharma

New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2024.

Prof. Vikas Sharma is a prolific writer who has published around a dozen novels, mainly in English. Most of his novels deal with romance even though various current issues are intertwined and discussed. The present novel *Love and Ego* has the sub-title 'A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga', which partially clarifies the context. It is the war scenario against which the romance between a Russian soldier and a Ukrainian girl takes place, reminding one of G.B. Shaw's famous play *Arms and the Man*. Alongside this international love affair, there is the sister-duo Savi and Sachi pining for their love and a bit of property too. The novel begins with focus on these girls but the thread is lost amidst focus on the love affair.

The story begins with the Ukrainian named Rada Lee entering a Russian girl Nathleen's apartment, but then the hero does not have chocolates in his magazine. Rada Lee stays long enough with this twice-divorced, now living singly woman, and even goes so far as to have a baby with her. Indeed, the possibility of a union during these 3+ years of war between Russia and Ukraine and the begetting of a baby is quite possible! Sharma chooses to condemn war in lengthy dialogues. At times, Nathleen mouths quite intelligent observations about history and politics, and so, another Shavian dramatic imperative is incorporated. (43).

The novel has some realistic images of meetings of the war room. (66-67). Sharma brings in the leaders of the two warring nations under the pseudonyms Sen-Sky and Phu-tin. The novel shows Sharma's aversion to war mongers and the arms dealers. The politics behind wars in history is riveted most often to personality cult and ego clash which hold good in case of the present war. While the leaders of Russia and Ukraine have been at daggers drawn, the ordinary people (if Rada Lee, the soldier is taken as a human being only), like to forget the national identities and go by natural instinct of love. Hatred is born of our acculturation through the state apparatus. This is indeed a worthwhile lesson that the novel underlines. Magical realism is popular in literature these days, so we find in Chapter 22, a dream experienced by the Bishop of St. Petersburg wherein appear not only the angel Michael but also Chitragupta, King Alexander, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, et al.

One, however, cannot overlook the incongruities in the novel. Nathleen, a staunch Communist, is seen observing wedding rituals in the name of the Greek chief god 'Lord Zeus'! (70). The Russian Orthodox Church, methinks, is popular in Russia as also in Ukraine, so why not Jesus! Ukraine also has NCC that we see in Indian colleges (46), and the chief of a police station is called SHO in Russia (92)! That should be acceptable in the name of postmodernism!



After the meeting of senior police officers, when the attendees are asked if everything is clear, the response comes as “Amen”, which surely is not the cops’ way of expressing acknowledgement.

At places, an attempt to add pages is seen, as for example, letters of words dangling vertically like a ladder with one letter occupying one line. (76). If this is the writer’s way of stressing a word, a nuanced description should be more welcome as a literary artifact. The writer goes whole hog quoting journalistic information about this or that issue – and there are any number of them impacting people all over the world. The cataloguing of bits of information, of places, or of persons’ names is fine to some extent, as for example of the recommendations of the former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev’s cabinet (?) produced in bulleted form (28), but too many lists mar the beauty of the literary work. The jampacked detail of journalistic type was noticed in the case of Taslima Nasreen’s *Lajja* which had a good number of extracts from newspapers about the violence against the minority community let loose by fanatics in Bangladesh. But she has moved on from that straitjacketed style.

While the writer’s zeal to cram all types of detail is understandable, the well-tried age-old literary convention, beginning with Anton Chekov, of showing, not telling has immense value for a literary work. If some scope is left for the reader to conjure up, it adds to the quality of suggestiveness, which is a desirable embellishment in case of a literary composition. (23). One also wishes there were more of atmospherics than the plain referential use of language in the matter of, say an intimate union of lovers.

Since the war between Russia and Ukraine has not ended at the time of publication of the novel, the writer too won’t bring a closure to it. However, the escape route adopted in the form of presentation of subject matter of too many papers read at conferences in universities in mofussil towns of India, though representing the novelist’s ingenuity, is rather exasperating for the readers. It seems the writer is in a hurry to add one more novel to his kitty. More could have been done to improve the quality of this freewheeling fictional piece.

**\*Dr. Jagdish Batra is Professor Emeritus of English at SRM University Delhi-NCR. Email: [drjagdishbatra@gmail.com](mailto:drjagdishbatra@gmail.com)**