

A. Jessie Michael, *The Mad Man and Other Stories*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2017. 101 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-52-0.

A line from the volume's titular story, "The Mad Man," mentions, "Your god, my god, it's all the same" (Michael 2). This simple, yet significant line, underscores the important messages that are within A. Jessie Michael's *The Mad Man and Other Stories* (2017). Michael, who has published short stories since the 1980s, continues to contribute to Malaysia's growing appreciation of the short story form in this volume of thirteen short stories. In the past few years, there has been a growth spurt of sorts when it comes to the short story in Malaysia, both in Malay and in English. Some might say that the period we are witnessing now can be considered a sort of rebirth or renaissance of the Malaysian short story. Buoyed by new and up-and-coming imprints, encouraging sales and a growingly enthusiastic readership, the short story in Malaysian literature continues to be experimented on, thrive and evolve. Here, Michael's latest work showcases her easy and simple style which draws us in to confront important issues, which are sometimes ignored or go unmentioned, and the everyday struggles of people in an earlier period of Malaysia's history. The socio-cultural issues discussed in the collection are familiar to many Malaysians today and showcases Michael's understanding of the maladies, struggles and prejudices affecting Malaysian society.

"The Mad Man" opens the volume by recounting the tale of one man's struggle with his loneliness. Govindasamy, whom many people believe to be mad, yearns for the comfort of human companionship. Yet, his strange behaviour and uncontrollable temper force people to keep their distance and the children to run away from him out of fear. This story best exemplifies the loneliness a person experiences when he/she is deprived of human companionship and the understanding that may heal or remedy this loneliness. In fact, loneliness, in its many forms, is a key theme that runs through many of the stories in this collection. Many of the characters in the stories seem to experience their own sense of loneliness in their struggle to overcome their personal demons and Michael showcases how they either overcome these challenges or succumb to them. In "The Mad Man," it is only when one of the children goes missing and Govindasamy manages to find the child that people begin to understand and appreciate him. At the end of the story, the children who had long feared him, return Govindasamy's grin and gift him a sour kana as a sign of their friendship. Through Govindasamy, Michael sends a powerful message about the power of understanding and how it can help overcome prejudices and fear within people.

Another great aspect about this volume is that many of the stories grapple with the various plights of women in society. In "The Female," readers are confronted with the value society places on sons over daughters. The protagonist

of the story, May, has to endure the pressure from people around her to produce a son and, later, the stigma of not giving birth to one:

May delighted in showing her girls off just to watch and hear reactions. Always, the Chinese women were aghast. They demanded that she have a boy. Always the Indian women sought comforting words. Their favourite – “It’s the girls who will care for their parents in their old age.” The Malay ladies warned that a husband without sons would tend to stray. She marveled at how stereotyped they were and pitied them their ingrained slavishness, that they measured their self-worth by their ability to produce a male child. (66)

This passage highlights the misogyny ingrained within the psyche of Malaysian society, in which a son is considered more important than a daughter and that woman’s worth lies within her ability to bear a male child. The inability to bear a son is seen as sacrilegious and the blame is often placed on the women. Despite what society thinks of her, May and her husband lead relatively happy lives with their four daughters.

This insight into issues affecting women continues with “Arokiasamy” and “Christmas at the Shelter.” These two stories deal with troubled marriages and how the women involved deal with their troubles. In “Arokiasamy,” a man neglects his work and family life to drink his days away. Frustrated by her husband’s alcoholism and neglect, Arokiasamy’s wife leaves him in search of better opportunities and ways to provide for their children. Even though the story seems to focus on Arokiasamy’s battle with himself, it is what happens to his family that I find memorable. Unlike Arokiasamy, who does not seem to change for the better by the end of the story, his wife manages to overturn her fortunes and lead a better life with the children. In “Christmas at the Shelter,” however, the tale of a troubled marriage takes on a more dangerous turn. Told from the first person perspective, the narrator recounts harrowing details of her abuse at the hands of her husband, the tiresome effort of trying to evade him and the horror of him eventually finding her. The protagonist is alone and feels haunted when dealing with her husband. Even the police, whom she goes to, lacks concern for her, exhibiting the apathy society holds towards the issue of domestic violence. In the end, fearing for her life and for her children, the narrator decides to end her life and the lives of her children. What should be noted here is the way Michael treats the protagonist’s suicide. There is no sense of judgment on what the protagonist decides to do, and instead, Michael expresses the relief the protagonist feels knowing that her seemingly endless suffering and her fear for her safety will soon come to an end.

Michael’s stories are also rich in their depiction of human relationships; their beauty and tragedy. In “The Old Crone” and “The Orphan Goes Home,” the respective protagonists, who were both left into the care of others by their parents, are told of their past and of their respective mothers by those who have

cared for them. While Clotilde in “The Orphan Goes Home,” is re-introduced and re-united with her birth mother by the nuns who had raised her, David in “The Old Crone,” figures out, in dismay, that the old and deranged lady whom he frequently encounters and later dies near the end, is his birth mother. One relationship between mother and child blossoms into something beautiful despite years of separation, while the other ends before it can even begin.

One of the shortcomings of this collection is that a couple of the stories seem highly predictable. In “Ghosts Alive!,” for example, a trishaw rider picks up an old lady on the side of the road and brings her to the house of a reclusive millionaire called Dr. Kuan. Once there, the old lady disappears from sight. We find out later from Dr. Kuan that the woman is the ghost of his wife who passed away ten years ago. Although the ending of the story hints at something more sinister and the framing of the story is reminiscent of well-known Malaysian horror stories, the enjoyment of the story is marred by its predictability.

Notwithstanding this shortcoming, I believe that Michael’s volume of short fiction is a triumphant effort that promises an engaging and enlightening reading experience. It will surely be of interest to those who love Malaysian fiction and culture.

Madiha Ramlan
International Islamic University Malaysia
Email: madyramlan@iium.edu.my