

Sreedhevi Iyer, *Jungle without Water and Other Stories*. London: Jetstone Paperback, 2017. 155 pp. ISBN 978-1-910858-10-3.

In Sreedhevi Iyer's *Jungle without Water and Other Stories*, many of the characters are searching for a sense of belonging: a place to pray, an I.C. (Identity card which grants them status and identity), or a heritage. Iyer is a Malaysian writer and academic educated in her home country, Australia and Hong Kong. Her empathy for the multi-faceted characters in her collection comes through whether they are studying overseas, squabbling as children over the colour of their I.C.s – newly granted at Malaysian independence – or travelling to an ancestral homeland to explore cultural roots.

“I.C.” (70), is set in both present day Kuala Lumpur and during the year of Malayan independence: 1957. A point of view switch from the first person perspective of the adult Kathieresan driving taxi to an omniscient narrator's observations of him with boyhood friends is effective. In their youth, Kathi (Kathieresan), Balan, Hanif and Ah Liong play games together with little awareness of their cultural or religious differences. They covet each other's best and most colourful marbles, but no real conflict exists among them until they get their identity cards (I.C.'s) at independence (87-88). Only when the boys bring the identity cards to show each other do they see different colours and realise they have different status. Not all of them are “bumiputera”¹ (87) and this difference among them leads to a physical fight. It is easy to understand why the adult Kathieresan is obsessed with the status and identity of his taxi passengers. “I.C.” is a complex story where the characters' use of Malay and the historical context make the story authentic.

In fact, the strongest and most engaging of the ten stories are “I.C.,” “Green Grass,” “The Man with Two Wives” and “Kadaram.”

In “Green Grass” (37), Mohan returns home to India, bringing his white wife to visit his family. The villagers call her Ray-chil (Rachel) and quickly get over their shyness with her because she is so friendly. Ray-chil works hard to learn Tamil. The locals find Mohan's wife friendlier than he is, “so stiff, so uncomfortable, as if he were the foreigner, not his new wife” (40). In fact, Ray-chil adapts so well – learning how to eat in local style sitting on the floor and asking the village tailor to make her a sari and matching blouse – that the locals ask to have their photo taken with her. The respect Ray-chil shows at the local Kali Amman temple inspires a villager to share a secret success, but Ray-chil inspires too much trust for her husband's comfort. This story looks at the idea of

¹ Literally, “sons of the soil”; it refers to a Malaysian of Malay origin or to the “native” population of Sabah and Sarawak.

being a trophy wife from a less common angle. Any woman may be seen as exotic if she is from a culture or race different from her husband's.

The story "The Man with Two Wives" (52) is another complex tale. It is narrated by a Tamil Penang man who owns twenty masala shops across the city. The story follows his struggles to break free of local ideas which limit status. Some people see him as already successful with so many shops, but when he meets Lata in accounting classes she sees him with fresh eyes. He is awe struck by her beauty and cleverness. She sees him as a man with potential beyond his street food empire. He notices that "she watched me, quietly, with – how the Mat Salleh² say – a certain kind of regard" (61). He enjoys how he looks in her eyes and with her encouragement even goes for an interview with an accounting firm, but his own self-loathing affects how he perceives his chances of moving up the ladder,

I want to open my mouth to answer also, air only come out. I am so afraid I'm going to say things like, 'Adei, enna, jintan manis one packet, fish curry powder three packets, where the turmeric, lah?' Aiyyo, I don't know what they said after that. I look down, and yeah, like really... my skin so black, I think of Lata... how I talk when I am with her, how my words will tumble out like a Gunung Jerai waterfall.... But no, skin still black, tongue still one bloody big piece of metal. (65)

His peers see him as a successful man with a chain of Masala shops and two wives, but not everything is as it appears. He loves his daughter who is clever as his mistress Lata and can't imagine leaving his wife.

I am certainly biased in favour of the story "Kadaram" (101) because I chose it to illustrate character development in a creative writing class activity. The story follows a Malaysian family on holiday in India. The father of the family has brought his wife and daughter there to introduce them to Tamil heritage, the history of the Chola empire and its connection to Malaysia. The daughter's careful recitation of details linked to Chola king Raja Raja Chola the second are compared to reciting her times tables. Such gestures help bring the father-daughter relationship into focus (102). During the family's drive to an ancient temple ruin, the mother uses her daughter's hunger as proxy for her own, showing us the mother's voice is heard less in that family (104). A simple yet pointed observation by a temple guardian at the end of the story about the real connection between Kedah in Malaysia and Kadaram, India show the father's need for a mythical heritage.

While all the above stories are strong, there are a few awkward patches in the collection where voice and authenticity do not work as well.

² A Whiteman or Westerner in Malay.

In the story “Cake and Green M&Ms” (108) a second use of the idea of reciting a list like the times tables (this time of compliments) (112) takes away from the effectiveness of the first reference in the aforementioned story “Kadaram” (102).

The story “The Last Day of a Divine Coconut” (122), which is told by an actual coconut awaiting its fate outside a Hindu temple, seems funny at the beginning and in the first few paragraphs, appears to be developing into an effective satire on the role of coconuts in Hindu religious ritual around the world. However, the narrative moves into a style more suitable for feature journalism or an academic article by page 126. For the next ten pages we experience little from the coconut’s point of view, although a lot of what I learned about Malaysian history was interesting: the divide and rule policy of the British colonial regime which brought workers from Madras to Malaysia (127), pre-Islamic Indian influences (132) and the continued special status of British, Australian and American tourists in Kuala Lumpur (136), for example.

The most noticeable case where voice was less convincing is in the first and title story “Jungle without Water.” That unique phrase is used in two places by characters with significantly different cultural roots and understanding of metaphor. The expression is used first by the main character Jogi – a Sikh Indian university student who has come to study in Australia. Jogi is remembering threats against his clerk father for refusing to take a bribe. A rich man threatened to have Jogi’s father transferred to “a jungle without water” (9).

The second time the expression is used in the story is by a white Australian girl outside church on Easter Sunday. Jogi finds himself outside the church as he wanders the Brisbane area in search of a place to pray. The girl, “Alice,” whom Jogi estimates as being around twelve or thirteen, is quite innocent and unafraid to speak to a stranger. She approaches Jogi and asks “Where are you from?” Jogi responds that he is from India. It is clear from her answer that Alice has no idea where that is.

Jogi in his innocence asks Alice the same question (25). Their mutual naiveté and curiosity get them chatting. In reply Alice tells Jogi that her ancestors “... were sent here because it was away from everywhere else, like a jungle without water...” (27). She describes the Brisbane area as “impossible” and suggests the British chose it as an effective penal colony because the heat and lack of water would be effective punishment. It is hard to believe that twelve year old Alice, who doesn’t know where India is, would use such a complex idea as the one expressed in the simile “like a jungle without water.”

While Jogi’s struggles whether or not to seek out a local Gurdwara (Sikh temple) and pray there feel authentic, as do comic observations about local “white Hindus” Hare Krishna (15-19) whom Jogi meets with his friend Sandeep during their search for a place to pray, I don’t think this story is quite strong enough to be the title story of the collection.

In conclusion, the collection *Jungle without Water and Other Stories* has many strong stories. I recommend it as an interesting and absorbing read which explores a wide variety of cultural perspectives. I enjoyed looking up Malay words, but I wonder if a glossary at the back of the book might be helpful to some readers and provide the most accurate definitions.

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