

MD Sharif Uddin, *Stranger to Myself: Diary of a Bangladeshi in Singapore*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2017. 176 pp. ISBN 978-981-4189-77-4.

I fear there are certain texts – local or otherwise – I would find difficulty reviewing due to issues I might have separating the writer’s meagre-cruel personality or ideology and their creations. MD Sharif Uddin poses a completely opposite problem: a modest, ingenuous, gentle mannered author with a warm, polite and generous personality, a model of patient grace under shabby pressure: how could I imagine disliking anything he wrote? Thus there probably is some unavoidably positive prejudice somewhere about this review. At the same time, having in the months since its publication a) taught *Stranger to Myself* to a class of undergraduates, and b) supervised two students’ academic studies of Sharif’s text, I feel I have gathered enough evidence to be sure it’s not just me: Sharif’s *Stranger to Myself* is a carefully-crafted, original and important example of local-migrant literature. It has resonated not only with my students but also with a range of academics and general readers who have read the book properly. *Stranger to Myself* is important not least because it is the most sustained, genuine migrant worker narrative to be published thus far in postcolonial Singapore.

That is not to say that *Stranger to Myself* does not have its (fascinating) complications, perhaps necessarily present in a book produced in this unique context. Sharif is a gentle man initially overwhelmed by supposed first world wonders while at the same time saddened and enraged in a situation fraught with unfairnesses and injustices in a nation-state where it is often better to say nothing, especially when you are as marginalised and disenfranchised as a migrant worker in an ideologically conservative, aggressively capitalist country. And yet Sharif cannot help but say something, and that something in this genre defying narrative is ultimately often a thing of beauty coupled with a constructive vision of how Singapore, and specifically the agents and employers responsible for migrant workers, could do so much better, be more human. Singapore seems to be gradually becoming more sensitised and empathetic to the presence and needs of migrant workers. Yet it is arguable whether even the most liberal Singaporean reader is yet ready for a comprehensive warts and all picture of migrant worker life in Singapore. Thus Sharif in his witnessed account perhaps pulls a few (probably many?) punches. Nevertheless, he also reveals sad shocks hitherto unknown to many of us however cynical we might be.

While described as a diary, *Stranger to Myself* comprises a series of vignettes interspersed with poems chronologically selected and arranged from Sharif’s arrival in 2008 to the year before publication 2016. Through these entries one can sense not only Sharif’s growing sense of disillusion and rage but also his shift from an ingénue bewildered Bangladeshi consciousness finding his feet in

Singapore, to a Singapore-informed and engaged lens retrospectively viewing his Bangladeshi homeland anew: the people forever lovingly, the politics caustically.

Gwee Li Sui's admiring Foreword makes clear why Sharif is an accomplished writer and *Stranger to Myself* is an important book. Gwee and Landmark publisher Goh Eck Kheng first discovered Sharif's "distinct sensibility... fragile and tortured yet unyielding" (11-12) in his impressive poem "A Worker's Journey" when sourcing for Gwee's anthology *Written Country*. This meeting ultimately helped generate Sharif's powerful and authoritative bottom-up reimaginings of the 2013 Little India riot, "Velu and a Riot," thankfully also included in *Stranger to Myself*. As Gwee astutely observes, Sharif, a disillusioned and browbeaten worker, like a Blakean prophet driven from perilous paths, musters the strength to go on, becoming "clearer in thought and more confident in anger" (12). The book should be a game-changer for all Singaporeans: once the whistle has been blown, the inconvenient truths held up to the light, to what extent can any of us, his more comfortable fellow-inhabitants, fend off some level of complicity in the profitable and cruelly expedient mis/treatment of migrant workers? Without fuss, but with a driven sense of social justice, Sharif informs and instructs us lucidly on much that we his principal liberal, privileged, English-speaking readership are not privy to, or have hitherto found it convenient to be fuzzy in reflecting on. Early on, in "First Night" (19) we read of Sharif's being neglected and dumped like garbage with no food by an unscrupulous Tamil agent on his first night in Singapore. We go on to encounter the exorbitant agent debts; the job-determining medical, which surely would make more sense taking place in Bangladesh rather than dragging a worker so far at the real risk of having to send him home in debt. Sharif mentions in passing the shockingly long working hours (I did the math: at least 90 in a week, at least 18 more than I think officially decreed). Well, shocking to me, but perhaps such details cut little ice with some ordinary Singaporeans themselves working maybe 70 + odd hours a week, a detail that might strangely lessen rather than increase empathy between Singaporeans and migrants. Then we encounter the (incompetent or cynically remunerative?) lack of organisation: Sharif is given preparatory training in Bangladesh for one kind of work, only to be given a job in Singapore he is untrained for and then cruelly mocked and blamed by employers and co-workers when he struggles. On top of this, there is the need for overtime if a migrant worker is to make any real money at all, which employers can bequeath or not as they see fit. Later we hear of the rigid Ministry of Manpower and other governmental stipulations, which are ultimately all for naught, as employers can avoid them in light of negligible enforcement. Those cruel and unsympathetic employers who compel workers to reach targets, putting pressure on them to cut corners and therefore stint on safety requirements, once in a while resulting in fatal consequences. Chinese bosses steadfastly won't allow Bangladeshi workers to celebrate Eid even for a few hours unless work is finished, targets met. The bosses are just as unyielding

regarding employee illness, thus we see Sharif working while having a fever of 103. But what most got my goat in this desert of empathy was the sense of things getting efficiently worse rather than compassionately better. In 2008, as the book begins, workers can still cook for themselves, which, despite 1.5 km walks with heavy bags of rice, the danger of sixty fellow inhabitants in dorms pilfering your eggs, gave a freedom and quality to meals. Later, the dreaded workers' canteens are instituted in which workers after working long arduous hours are allowed nothing but literally rotten curry – for which privileged workers must pay from their meagre salary of 150 dollars a month. Before reading, I had expected the exploitation of workers being overworked for little pay. I had not expected workers being cynically viewed as a “captive audience,” corralled into paying hand over fist for inedible and corrupt food at a good profit margin for employer and vendor. Reading Sharif's rueful dispassionate account, it seems a wonder he and other workers aren't screaming, protesting their rights. But having no rights, Sharif and his fellow workers face all this fatalistically, with resignation: it really won't do to make a fuss. The clever employers have them over a barrel. Still, workers do have hope, tears as consolation.

I think it seems poignant that the front cover should be in the colours of the Bangladeshi flag, but at the same time there is the raised right hand of Sharif no longer holding the edited out cigarette. This erasure at first irritated Sharif, but then purportedly inspired him to kick the habit. The majority of Sharif's original Bengali text of *Stranger to Myself* was translated into English by Md Rokonzaman. The young local poet and essayist Theophilus Kwek is to be commended for his careful refining and editing of the text. However, one wonders what has been lost in translation and transcreation. Sharif's original text seems to have not been in chronological order, patterned by other criteria. It would be interesting to know more of the process that led to the diary like order. Occasionally one wonders if there are areas where Sharif's rougher original text might have been better retained. The vignette “Model” (77) in which Sharif seems to be communing with a beautiful golden haired woman, who ultimately turns out to be mannequin in a shop window, was originally entitled “Puppet.” In a way, I prefer that original title.

Sharif's Preface for me is purposefully telling: after a paean to Singapore, he writes,

While the city prospers under the government's plans, millions of workers have made it dynamic and enriched it economically. The sacrifices of migrant workers are written in every inch of Singapore – in the bricks of buildings, ship irons, under the floor of houses. (13)

While this passage may strike us as a little gendered, lest we forget the less demonstrable but just as necessary and valuable contributions of female migrant

workers, it does remind me of the queasiness I experience when I see the rushed erection that is Marina Bay Sands. The bewilderingly poor, unsympathetic and alienating treatment he's experienced leads Sharif to suggest, "Maybe my exile from home and nation is a punishment for past sins" (13). The Preface ends with foreshadowing poetic, powerful statements: "How much change happens in exile?" "The heart is a dormant volcano" (14). Do such images mediate or intensify our hopefully increasingly empathetic sense of migrant worker experience?

Almost on arrival in Singapore Sharif feels the sinking sense of being a mere worker ironically "shut out" from the privileged Singapore life he and his fellow workers past and present make possible, keep going. Sharif, someone of standing, respected in Bangladesh, is affronted by his treatment in Singapore, which bears some similarities to indentured slavery, but he knows he must keep his temper. When he is fined exorbitantly for the first offence of dropping a cigarette end, one gets the hint of a society infrastructure that thrives on non-forgiveness, draconian measures thrown into a raking light.

Perhaps one of the most arresting moments in the text comes five years on into Sharif's odyssey in Singapore. Sharif has steadily risen through the ranks to comparatively less back breaking work, a managerial position as a safety supervisor. His sustained, quite chilling description of his engagements with PRC workers en masse makes one wonder can this be happening in first world Singapore? It resembles something out of an Elizabethan travel narrative:

managing more than 300 Chinese workers crammed in four hallways isn't so easy.... they have cooking utensils though workers are not allowed to cook. The company does not allow them to eat anything it has provided, but the catered food is just not good enough.

Electric lines are spun like spiders' webs. Everyone has two or three mobile phones to charge. Those moments after power is shut down, when the Chinese workers start screaming, is frightful. Then I have to call the electrician.

....

Sometimes, when I am lying on the cold, windy side of the container, I wonder if they consider me an enemy. I feel afraid a lot of the time in the night. I mess with them everyday. I wonder if they will attack me. (86-87)

I've not read anything as arresting as this in recent Singapore literature. Even so, did the editor make the right decision to change the original English MS's "mess up" to mere "mess"? But *Stranger to Myself* is not all about the horrors of the Singapore workplace. Sharif's writing seems more tender recollecting the rare moments escaping from work and engaging with Singapore proper, or the feminine. There is his day by day brief imagined-real communion with the Chinese grandmother on the bus, which not for the first time makes me wonder

if there are more connections than supposed between migrant workers and the majority of Singaporeans.

Later in the narrative we encounter the Russian girl Natalie, Sharif appreciating her eyes, veering between a memory and a sad dream. Listening with a group of labourers to Kathleen talk about a Singapore University sends Sharif off Wordsworth-like into a reverie regarding his own university days. My own expectations are challenged by Sharif's respectful dedication of his worker's diary to the memory of Lee Kuan Yew.

What makes Sharif's writing feel so refreshingly authentic must have something to do with the clear matter of fact, at other times deftly fluid description. This is gently powerful writing, intimate, without unaware, shabby ego. At the same time, Sharif's prose and verse seem grounded in the minute particulars of unique quotidian experience, otherwise inaccessible to us, which I at least find immensely satisfying, stirring to read. The migrant worker albeit mediated through translation and editing feels as if he is encountered for real. There is a range too to the content and style of this book, at some distance from the placatory, transcreated and stylised populism of predecessors, just now and then touching the harshly concrete grounded agitated scream that is Mahbub Hasan Dipu's "In Exile" ("I am confined in a cell, at-/ 31, Street 2, Sungei Kadut" (*Migrant Tales* 49).

My only sadness, reservation is that there isn't more. I can imagine a thick history, no holds barred, complete with every minute particular, a day-by-day warts and all account of Sharif's life here, complete with the slang words uttered at dishonourable construction employers and others. Clearly, this was not what Sharif was going for – and almost certainly Singapore is as ever not ready for that yet – could it even be published? Nevertheless, I eagerly look forward to reading far more of MD Sharif Udin's poetry and prose, especially his short stories, as well as the imminent work of other male and female migrant writers seemingly chock-full of actual tales to tell.

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