

Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2010. 328 pp. ISBN 978-981-4302-71-5.

In an article in *The Times* of London, published on July 3, 1982 entitled “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance,” Salman Rushdie had stated that “[the English] language needs to be decolonised, to be made in other images, of those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon cultures are to be more than artistic ‘Uncle Toms.’ And it is this endeavour that gives the new literatures of Africa, the Caribbean and India much of their present vitality and excitement” (7). That was almost three decades ago. In the meantime, with globalisation and transculturalism in the postcolonial era, Queen’s English has long lost its hegemony and *englishes* of various flavours have captured the world market, both in commerce as well as in literary studies. This anthology of short stories is a commendable collection of voices from different Asian countries and the kaleidoscopic nature of the contributors justify the title as a virtual “rainbow.” Moreover, it helps the reader to understand that Asians have moved away from creating what was known as “Oriental” fiction.

The twenty-five stories in this collection come from East, West, South and Southeast Asia, representing as many as ten countries: Bangladesh, India, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam and they dwell upon ordinary and extraordinary issues of life including joy, sorrow, love, loss, and loneliness in their culturally rooted circumstances. Since several of the writers reside outside their homeland, the diasporic angst, nostalgia and memory play significant roles in their stories as well. Getting an insight into different cultures under the homogeneous umbrella term “Asian,” we get stories with both positive and negative values. While some talk about the “quest for happiness, harmony and justice” that is desirable for the human soul, others “delve into the horrors of war, violence, death, greed, selfishness, betrayal” and all things that are of negative value. One also notices some common themes across countries like the relationships between genders, sexes, generations, races, religions and classes, the evils of patriarchy, intricacies of the husband-wife relationship, the aspirations of Asians to migrate to the west for better living conditions, the idea of a “home,” etc. Again we have others that focus on specific socio-cultural issues like the difficult life in a Malaysian rubber plantation, the lives of ordinary people enmeshed in the Vietnam War, or the lament of a cultural ennui engulfing contemporary Singaporean life where traditional family values are being forgotten.

Some of the contributors are freelancers writing occasionally, whereas others are more seasoned literary artists. Apart from multifarious themes, what

draws our interest is the use of innovative and experimental devices in the stories. Most of them begin *in media res* and offer open endings and show that the writers, both new and old, have taken great pains to experiment with the form. For example, we find the use of flashback in K.S. Maniam's "Guardian Knot" and Monideepa Sahu's "Flowers and Paper Boats"; a first person voice of a dead man narrating his family history from within his picture frame on the wall in "Maya Niwas"; a rarely used second person voice in "Baby's Breath"; the diary format in "Breakfast with the Fugitives"; multiple voices and interior monologue in "Broken"; symbolism in "Patchwork"; and elements of magic, mystery and supernaturalism in "Broken" and "Alone and Palely Loitering." As the editor rightly reiterates, these stories "demonstrate that Asian imagination has responded to the short story form in varied ways, and that writers are willing to take the risk and experiment with the form to create new styles" (23).

In his detailed introduction to the volume, Professor Mohammad Quayum has located the genesis of contemporary Asian stories written in English by giving us a socio-historical account of the Western form of the short story genre and the introduction of English in this part of the world. He has also made it clear that the proliferation of the English language has not been equal in all Asian countries and as a result writers from the Indian sub-continent account for almost half the stories in this collection. Though each story is unique in its own way, one cannot but mention the powerful stories that have been written by writers residing in Bangladesh or are of Bangladeshi origin. Unlike India, which perhaps has the longest history of writers writing in English, this seems unique for a young nation that has struggled both politically and socially to keep Bengali as the official language. In "Seduction" Razia Sultana Khan tells us about a middle class joint family where the young daughter-in-law of the house is enticed and enamoured by a "chaiwalla," a tea vendor on the street, who seems to offer her release from her claustrophobic existence within the house. Another remarkable story is "Waiting" where Farah Ghuznavi writes about the aims and aspirations of the haves and have-nots in contemporary Dhaka, especially during the time of Eid. Perhaps the most significant contribution from this group comes from Fayeza Hasanat, a diasporic Bangladeshi settled in the US, who narrates how relationships change within an extended family in order to facilitate that elusive "green card" required for settling and working in the US. How the lure of the lucre makes and breaks lives of people who want to immigrate to the west also comes out very poignantly in Vijay Lakshmi's story "The Wait."

The two entries from Pakistan are totally different in theme, content and style. Whereas Fawzia Afzal-Khan in "Dreamscapes: Ma Vie En Rouge" focuses on the problem of an intellectually ambitious contemporary woman who is torn between the modern ideas of feminism, lesbianism and gay rights on the one hand and her innate feminine desires on the other, Qaisra Shahraz's

“The Zemindar’s Wife” gives the reader a beautiful picture of feudal lifestyle and class consciousness that is embedded in the psyche of many of the country’s inhabitants. Another compelling piece comes from Suad Khatab Ali of the United Arab Emirates, as her story “The Subjugated Ones” traces the pangs of suffocation that the female protagonist suffers both physically and psychologically when she has to wear the *abaya* in her job as the only female police detective in the country.

Though the selection of the twenty-five stories is a subjective choice of the editor (and he admitted that he had a hard time selecting them from the one hundred and forty entries submitted) the reviewer has certain reservations about the inclusion of two stories. As stated in the Introduction, the editor had invited entries from “writers of Asian background regardless of their current domicile.” Under this circumstance the story “Seiji” by the American writer George Polley, though set in rural Japan, sticks out like a sore thumb. Again, including a story by Sassenarine Persaud, a Guyanese writer of Indian origin currently residing in the US, creates more problem because this would mean that we can include most Caribbean writers, (including V.S. Naipaul) or writers whose ancestors migrated from India two generations ago to work as *girmits* in the erstwhile British colonial plantations in Fiji, Mauritius and other places. Thus the unique “Asianness” of the volume is somewhat diluted. Though it is a very difficult proposition to label a writer as per his/her literary output, physical locale or passport, sticking to strict geographical jurisdictions is probably the safest bet. In fact, every reader of *A Rainbow Feast* will expect the editor to do a second volume and give us more multifarious voices from Asia.

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