

Mahmud Rahman, *Killing the Water*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2010. 199 pp. ISBN 978-014-306-36.

These beautifully crafted short stories by Bangladesh born author Mahmud Rahman take readers on a journey from a remote Bengali village in the 1930s, at a time when George VI was King-Emperor, to the war-torn East Pakistan of 1971 struggling to be reborn as Bangladesh; and then on to stories set around Bangladeshi migrants to the USA in the 1980s and 90s. This collection, in fact, can be divided into two sections, following a clear chronological pattern. In the first section, the stories are set in Bangladesh, and reflect the author's youthful experiences and perceptions of his native land. The second set of stories is set in the US, and reflects the author's perceptions as a more mature migrant to a foreign land.

A predominant theme linking these stories is war and violence. The author draws upon his first-hand experiences of the war in 71 and the effects of war, migration and displacement. At that point in the history of Bangladesh, people had little choice except armed resistance. But, as the author indicates through his stories, the people paid a cost, both as individuals and as a society. The strong and striking story, "Kerosene," is told by a Bangladeshi nationalist protagonist in the times of the 1971 war. A rational, normal, basically peace loving young man, he is compelled by circumstances, some beyond his control, but some also a hapless result of his own choices, to indulge in an act of uncharacteristic aggression.

"Before the Monsoons Come" is another story which tackles another aspect of violence and its effects. In this story, "On 25 March 1971, the night brought a rain of bullets upon an unarmed populace. On the second night, soldiers invaded their flat and dragged away Moni's father." Fleeing with his mother to an island far removed from the historic struggle taking place, Moni tries to "get the children to have a feeling for the larger world they lived in. Reading from the books alone wasn't working. Neither was him talking."

As the setting of the later stories shift years later to the US, violence is sometimes a stone's throw away. "Orange Line" strikingly portrays the threat Asian immigrants face from racism in the US. In "Blue Mondays at the Gearshift Lounge," a former Bangladesh "Mukti Bahini" soldier comes within tantalising reach of companionship and love in the US while tackling the ghosts of his violent past experiences.

These beautiful stories are told with mature restraint. Even stories with scenes of direct violence are told not from the point of view of an angry young man, but through the eyes of someone reflecting on violence and its effects through the mellowing filter of time and greater thoughtfulness. The author succeeds in reflecting the myriad complexities of life, of conveying a sense of people living in worlds of uneasy choices.

Rahman's stories are rife with movement, which is inexorable. Many of the characters are restless and agitated for various reasons. At the core, most of them are searching for some type of connection. People are forced to migrate, often to seek out a better and more peaceful life in distant lands. Yet while people move, their essential human-ness can draw the most disparate individuals into surprising bonds. In "Yuralda," a beautiful Dominican girl dances flamboyantly to her own inner music, drawing the Sri Lankan protagonist into an unfolding love story in the backdrop of a Laundromat in Rhode Island. The characters are well developed and can retain striking images. Carlotta Jones, the African American blues singer in a Detroit bar, is drawn to the enigmatic military-looking man from Asia who appreciates her and her music.

Water is another prevailing presence linking these twelve stories as a symbol of life, death and rebirth. In the stories set in Bangladesh, water is a strong presence in a land of many rivers, ponds, monsoon floods and riverboat rides. Even in the American stories, the characters often reach a turning point near water. This isn't artificially superimposed as a device, but comes as part of the flow of writing. In "Yuralda," "Blue Mondays," and "Man in the Middle," lakes and a river frame the background for deep thought, and the building of human bonds and connections. The title story "Killing the Water" plays with myth-making from events from his own childhood.

"Water," my mother used to say, "is the source of all life."

All life? Wasn't this something of a heresy, since in the tradition into which I was born, Allah was the source of all life and it was out of clay that we humans had been shaped? Where did water come into the picture? Perhaps my mother was given to making such an unorthodox claim because of the two years she had spent in medical college.

Interestingly, the Asian immigrant protagonists in the stories set in the US are attracted to the Yuraldas and Carlottas. But there is a relative dearth of fascinating young women as potential lovers in the stories set in the homeland. There are differences in tone in the two sets of stories. The women in the first set are mainly mothers who are loving and fascinating in their own way, which is distinct from the fascination the Western women evoke. In the first set of stories based on the author's memories of growing up in Bangladesh, there is almost no hint of romance or sexual tension. The romantically intriguing women appear in the later stories set in America.

These bittersweet, enduring stories provoke deep thought. They are engrossing with well-drawn characters and clear storylines, and also exude an aura of calm reflection.

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