

**Rumaizah Abu Bakar, *The Female Cell*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2011. 166 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-31-8.**

Reading Rumaizah Abu Bakar's splendid collection of short vignettes in *The Female Cell* proves how wrong Wong Phui Nam was when he sounded the death knell for Malaysian writings in English at a press conference for the Singapore Writers Festival in 2009. Contrary to his grim predictions, a new generation of writers have emerged over time and these include, among others, Rumaizah herself, Chuah Kok Yee, Shi-Li Kow, to name but a few. Although official support is not readily given, the Malaysian literary scene is alive and thriving judging from events held such as regular monthly readings, blogging, book fests, book launches, story competitions etc. It is heartening to note that it is the hosting of such events, apart from the fact that new publishers have emerged, that have created opportunities for budding writers to experiment with refreshing perspectives, topics and themes.

Before discussing the collection, perhaps it is best to begin the review with a note on its format. The collection consists of twenty short stories which are told in two parts. The first part titled "Loves, Lies and Lives" contains twelve stories while the second part with the title of "Travel Tales" includes the remaining eight. The stories in the first part explore the lives of ordinary people in an urban setting, their relationships with one another, their feelings and emotions as well as their conflicts and struggles. In the second part, the stories centre on the travels and adventures of the author in exotic places such as Egypt, Thailand, Turkey, Makkah (Mecca), the Philippines and Malaysia's historical city, Melaka (Malacca), labelled by the author as the "City of Warriors." The stories are simple and some are quite short (about two pages in length only). As such, they would appeal to those in need of a quick read while waiting for a friend in a cafe or the LRT, the latter, incidentally, happens to be a popular setting for a couple of stories. Elements of humour and irony are injected to enhance the appeal and dramatic effect of these short vignettes.

In a number of stories, the author sketches an urban life in modern day Malaysia that is fast-paced and energetic. People are always in a hurry and they barely notice anyone or anything in their rush. When the train stops, commuters charge and exit from all directions "like a stampede of elephants" (60). This modern living environment can also be cruel and harsh. It encourages competition and rivalry which may have a detrimental effect on human relationships. This is observed in the first story entitled "Christmas in July." The story revolves around the relationship between two hotel chefs, a Caucasian named Trennen Wolf, and a local chef, Yu. Trennen, an "award winning flame master" is the *sous* chef of the Caribbean Grill and Bar, a place for fine dining

and a show kitchen, and Yu manages the hotel's coffee house named *Sambal*. Feelings of envy and jealousy overcome Yu as he believes that he has been sidelined by the management and the media as more attention and publicity are given to the Caucasian chef. Since Yu is a senior he feels that he deserves to be appointed as the *sous* chef of fine dining instead of Trennen. Yu whips up support from his colleagues by gossiping and slandering Trennen and the management behind their backs. Trennen is not without flaws as he uses his charm to gain popularity with the media and the management and shamelessly flirts with Fang Hua, the secretary of the F & B director whom Yu has a liking for.

The subway system and the use of the train as a popular mode of transport are indicators of the wealth and economic standing of a country, in this case Malaysia. The country is rich but it may also neglect the poor and the disenfranchised who may have to eke out a living in crowded train stations. Perhaps, this is Rumaizah's critique of a fast developing Malaysia. For instance, in the story "Making Ends Meet" a bald Chinese artist with "deformed legs" (51) paints pictures of trains with different backgrounds and receives donations from commuters in the form of coins which are dropped into his condensed-milk can. At the same station, a woman "in a kebaya and hair held up in a sanggul" (52) sells *kerepek* (packets of home-made chips) to the commuters passing by and a visually challenged couple sings old favourites from the "walkway that connects two LRT stations" (53).

Urban life is also stressful and it can have an alienating effect on its dwellers and cause them to feel physically dislocated especially if they cannot fit in. Unable to cope with the pressures of modern day living, they behave in eccentric ways. This is evident in the case of the middle-aged man wearing "a green *baju melayu*, *kain pelikat* and *songkok*" (51), who decides to sit on a *mengkuang* mat next to the handicapped artist. This man scares the commuters away as he keeps shouting "Mat Rempit is *haram*" at the sight of two teenagers walking by in school uniform, "exposing your hair is *haram*" to the woman *kerepek* seller, "bribery is *haram*" to a middle aged man in a *songkok* wanting to donate some money, and "singing is *haram*" to the visually impaired singing duo. His threatening proclamations affect the daily earnings of the handicapped artist. More importantly, the loud proclamations of *haram* are symptomatic of the larger social context where the *halal* and *haram* issue is constantly discussed in the media by holier-than-thou politicians and the narrow-minded religious leaders, which has bewildered the public in general and Muslims in particular.

Another eccentric character is depicted in the story "The Physics Professor." This character lugs around a small travel trolley which has a handle fitted with a study lamp and a fan with colourful blades. Four Double A boxes are stacked on the trolley with the word "Intellectuals" written on a paper which is stuck to the uppermost box. Commuters, which includes the narrator,

avoid him as they are fearful of him, and also because of the way he dresses and presents himself in public. To the narrator, the man looks like a “religious fundamentalist” as he is “dressed in a dark green jubah and white ketayap” (54). The man may be eccentric but he is quite harmless. In fact, he helps the narrator to open the door of the elevator by pressing the open button. In her panic-stricken state, the narrator, wary of the crazy professor behind her, kept pressing the close button causing the elevator door to remain shut. Essentially, this story demonstrates the pitfalls of stereotyping and pigeon-holing people based on their outer appearance. This can take place anywhere but mostly in the cities where outward appearance is the main marker of identity. It also shows how irrational fear can cloud our better judgement and influence our perception of people and our attitude towards them.

All is not gloom and doom in urban life as there is a glimmer of hope, and this is shown in the story “Shoebags.” It focuses on the sudden disappearance of Mak Teh, the sister of Mak Su, in Makkah’s *Masjid Al-Haram*. Both sisters are widowed and it is their first pilgrimage to Makkah. Humanity is shown through the compassion and selfless acts of three young women whom the sisters meet at the mosque. Like the sisters, they are pilgrims as well and have joined the usual congregation at the mosque to perform their *zohor* (afternoon) prayer. On being informed about Mak Su’s disappearance, the three young women quickly decide to look for her in the crowded mosque. Unfortunately, it becomes a fruitless search as she is nowhere to be found. The kindness shown by the three young women stands in stark contrast to a big Arab woman “wearing an expensive-looking black robe with crystals sewn in” (127), in another story titled “Street Singers” which appears in Rumaizah’s “Travel Tales” section. This well-to-do woman is seen talking to a poor maimed child, one of the street beggars in Makkah, in a shop. The boy is “fiddling with a toy car” (127) and places the car back on the display counter after the woman gestures to him to leave the shop. It is indeed sad and ironic that even in the holy land, the rich do not show any compassion for the poor. Undoubtedly, owning the toy car would have brought much joy and happiness to the poor street urchin.

Like a camera, the short vignettes take snapshots and capture interesting and dramatic moments, mood, character, object or setting. This is clearly shown in a number of short stories in the collection. For instance, the focus of one of the stories “Beads” is on a solitary bead that strays away from a necklace worn by a woman sitting in an LRT coach at Dang Wangi station. The bead gets “kicked out of the train” (26) and ends up on the platform. By the same token, the focus of another story, “Stilettoes,” is on the “stilettoes with tiny black heels” (71) worn by a girl with dyed blond hair. The narrator experiences a strange foreboding that the girl with stilettoes will step into a puddle and fall flat on her face while crossing the road. Ironically, nothing happens to the girl as she

manages to cross the road safely. It is the narrator who steps into the puddle and lands on her buttocks.

Much attention is also given to the setting of the stories, especially in the travel tales. The descriptive language used displays the author's keen sense of perception and eye for details. Vivid imagery is employed to evoke the reader's sensory experiences and to create a realistic setting. Through her eyes, we visualise her room in Selcuk, Turkey: "It is small. Cosy and clean. The twin beds have sheets with fern-leaf patterns, chocolate brown blankets and small green cushions. The Kayserian carpet on the floor and Turkish spread on the wall brightens up the room. I see a wooden dresser next to her beds and a wardrobe near the door. The en suite bathroom, with its plain white tiles, looks spacious and modern" (97). And the following is her description of a thermal pool in Karahayit, Turkey: "It looks like a different world. Rising steam blurs the walls and ceiling, making the place look smaller than it is. Bubbles popping out of the hot red murky water make the pool look like a large pot of boiling soup. Its rust-like mineral dregs reminds me of a documentary on Mars that I saw on the National Geographic Channel" (115).

Her travel tales are interesting as she describes some ghostly encounters in Cairo and Bangkok. She also demystifies certain myths about prisons and prisoners and foreigners in other parts of the world in her tales. The Old Provincial Jail in Vigan City in the Philippines, in the story "*Parol* in the Gardens," houses female inmates in a building named "The Female Cell," which happens to provide the title for the whole collection. Unlike the usual drab and dreary prisons, the building is brightly coloured and has loud music coming from it. Inmates are not confined to their cells as there *is* one seen sitting on a wooden stool in the porch and singing on a microphone. Potted plants which surround the building and clothes drying on the clothesline create a homely atmosphere. Male inmates who are housed in another building are given their conjugal rights. They are quite creative and self-reliant as they earn their keep selling *parol* or Christian ornaments. Ironically, the author feels safer being in the jail than on the streets of Manila.

In her travels, she meets many foreigners who have been very helpful to her. However, one senses her cynicism when she describes her visit to Melaka, one of Malaysia's popular historical and heritage sites. It is indeed ironic that she *is* able to find her way by obtaining information about travel and the various sites from the locals in the countries and cities that she *has* visited as a tourist such as Turkey, Bangkok, Singapore, Vigan City (Philippines) etc. However, she loses her way in Melaka as she is not able to locate Jalan Hang Lekir. Strangely, even the locals have no inkling as to where Jalan Hang Lekir is. Some of them are not very helpful when she stops to ask them for directions. In desperation, she decides to get a map but she is not fortunate as the Tourism Office is closed on Sundays. The general apathy and lackadaisical attitude of the people

in the “bolehland” makes a mockery of Melaka’s recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1982.

On the whole, Rumaizah’s debut collection is a welcome addition to the Malaysian literary scene. Her candid portrayal of urban life makes the stories interesting and riveting. Writing vignettes can be a daunting task, as one has to be precise, accurate and as brief as possible. In this regard, the author has done well. I look forward to more of such stories from the author in future.

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