

Sunil Nair, *When All the Lights are Stripped Away*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012. 283 pp. ISBN 978-981-4361-44-6.

When All the Lights are Stripped Away is the first novel by London-based, Malaysian-born publisher Sunil Nair. It is an ambitious work, which interweaves elements of a family saga, a *bildungsroman* and a political novel. It looks at interesting ideas and important recent events from Malaysia's political scene. However, it is a rather turgid novel; the characters are not particularly engaging, the prose is heavy, and the dialogue oratorical rather than conversational. It seems to me to be a novel with an agenda, which unfortunately is not worked out clearly or convincingly.

The protagonist Anil is a young Malaysian-Indian man. His mother dies, and after the official mourning period is over, he discovers his father making love to their domestic helper. Angered, Anil leaves Muar for Kuala Lumpur, where he drifts into friendships, a job and a serious relationship. He is summoned back to Muar by his dying father. Back home, he begins to discover surprising things about his father's past, about the level of his wealth, power and influence, and his plans for Anil himself.

Potentially there is much of interest here. Anil's friends in Kuala Lumpur, for example, are a mixed-race group of men – the stereotypical combination of Indian, Chinese and Malay – who frequent the food stalls near his flat and discuss politics late into the night. He begins a relationship with Santhia, a successful newspaper editor; he also starts working, first as a painter of movie posters, then as a cartoonist for Santhia's newspaper. He is thus exposed to a wide variety of people – intellectuals, professionals, working-class people – and they all gather to talk at the food stall, like so many other Malaysians. This would be a perfect opportunity to delve deeply into the complexities and nuances of Malaysia's social fabric.

Unfortunately, these characters, who could be so interesting, fall flat because Nair has not managed to convincingly turn them into full and rounded human beings in all their complexity. He tells his readers that when the friends start discussing politics, they begin calling each other names like “idiot *bumiputeras*,” “*cina babi* and *keling biawak*” (86). He then explains that “the tensions rise to the surface and are driven underground in a matter of minutes. After running down the list of standard insults and derogatory names for each race, they fall back into light-hearted banter. It is the Malaysian version of racial harmony at the end of the twentieth century” (86). This treatment of Malaysian “racial harmony” is shallow, not addressing the very real issues of race and belonging within this nation. His description of the “standard insults and derogatory names” makes the racial insults sound like part of an accepted script

or game which everyone knows and doesn't take too seriously. Beyond this, we have no real idea of how the characters really feel about each other, and whether their friendship stretches beyond the confines of the food stall. Santhia is also a cipher: she is successful and dynamic, so it is a bit of a mystery to me why she is so devoted to Anil, who appears to do nothing more than drift through life, observing but not really taking part. Her devotion extends to the point where, very close to giving birth, she travels all the way to flood-hit Muar to make sure that he is there for the birth. At this juncture, she suddenly turns into a kind of symbol, the bearer of life who gives birth just after Anil's father's death, paving the way, perhaps, for his reincarnation. The only person who has something of an inner life is Goh Poh, Anil's boss in the poster-painting business; we are allowed a glimpse into this inner life through Nair's description of his Japanese garden, a lovely, delicate, ordered world which Goh Poh describes as his "lifeline, something to keep him sane" (97).

One would expect Anil's journey to Kuala Lumpur to be the start of a journey towards maturity or personal growth, and Nair does hint at this. He begins to take painting and cartooning seriously enough that he is able to support himself. But he evinces no passion for his work or his girlfriend, and registers little interest in his friends. He thus remains a blank to us, and we are not fully convinced of his growth. Even when he goes back home, although he delves into his childhood and his relationship with his mother and her paintings, and tries tracing his father's footsteps in order to get to know him better, there is little conviction in the portrayal. Nair tells us things, but does not allow them to arise naturally from the interactions and conversations of the characters.

Part of the problem is that Nair is trying to do too much in this novel. Apart from following Anil on his journey into his past, we are also given hints of his journey into the future, as planned by his father. As the novel progresses, we begin to realise that this sick old man is in fact extremely wealthy and powerful, and has been involved in some serious political machinations. Specifically, he has helped build a conspiracy against a highly-placed politician, successfully getting him jailed for sodomy and corruption. Given that he appears to be hand-in-glove with Barisan Nasional (the National Front; the political alliance which has been governing Malaysia since Independence), and that most of his wealth comes from his partnership with them, it comes as something of a surprise to find that his driving ambition is to try to see to it that his son Anil becomes Malaysia's first non-Malay Prime Minister, something which is antithetical to the Barisan ideology. What is even more puzzling is why he thinks this is possible – leaving aside the political structures and strictures which would prevent this from happening, Anil completely lacks the conviction, passion and involvement which must surely drive a successful politician. Because Nair tries to take us on Anil's journey, there is no room for a deep

exploration of Malaysia's political landscape, and because of the intrusion of the politics, we get distracted from Anil's journey.

Towards the end of this novel, Anil muses about his feelings of detachment from those around him:

He has felt like an observer, an onlooker, since coming home. A peeping tom who is curious to see everything but who wants to remain hidden, detached, who wants nothing to touch him too deeply. (234)

Certainly, this is how the character comes across to the reader. Unfortunately, what this means is that we, as readers, also feel curiously detached from him, and his experience therefore does not touch as too deeply either. For me, this made the novel a rather difficult and unsatisfying read.

Susan Philip
The University of Malaya, Malaysia