

Dina Zaman, *King of the Sea*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2012. 154 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-36-3.

The volume of nine stories, *King of the Sea*, written by Dina Zaman and published by Raman Krishnan's Silverfish Books, might well have been renamed *Kampong Trysts – Eros and Thanatos*, for their acute predilection for voyeurism and death.

Dina Zaman is a well-respected writer within her home country – Malaysia. Ms Zaman has been variously, a journalist, an editor, a blogger and a lady with a keen social conscience. She broke new ground (for Malaysia) when, in 2007, she wrote, collated and edited her *I Am Muslim* collection of inquiries (previously published in *www.malaysiakini.com*, from January 2005 to August 2006). In that book she attempted to reveal the diversity of Muslim thought and practice within the states of Malaysia and, to a large extent, succeeded. A second volume was planned, but never materialised. It was to be a book of promise which, ultimately, was never fulfilled. Prior to *I Am Muslim*, in 1997, Ms Zaman had produced a booklet of short stories entitled *Night and Day*.

Ms Zaman is an *Asian Public Intellectual* (Senior Fellow), and is regularly published in newspapers (online and off) and, occasionally, from out Silverfish Books, at Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She re-enters the book market with her slight volume of short stories (154 pages) *King of the Sea*. The length of the book, the (mostly) gray cover, and the few stories therein lend the book a slight inconsequential air.

King of the Sea is a collection relating rudimentary tales of Malays, kampongs and intimations of life (as lived?) within the rural expanses which cover the majority of previously jungle-clad Malaysia. For this series of titbits (rather than a full meal) Ms Zaman has evidently drawn from her not inconsiderable experience of those far from idyllic Malaysian rustic areas, and reveals for her audience intimations of lewdness and libidinousness signposting concupiscence within Malaysia's kampongs. Perhaps some revelations are family recollections. Maybe those recollections are coupled with observances gleaned from such rustic and pastoral environments as the mythologised kampong which Malays frequently return to on high days and holidays (*Balik Kampung*). Whichever the source, there seems little doubt that a heavy amount of Jean Paul Sartre's *retrospective illusion* has coloured the "golden age" in which these tales take place. Could this be Ms Zaman's wishful thinking or a raunchier *déjà vu* reminiscent of the film maker Yasmin Ahmad's rose-tinted advertisements and filmic out-pourings?

This fresh volume from Ms Zaman is, perhaps, not quite as brand sparkling new as it may seem. For many, if not all, of the stories contained in

this slim offering, hail from Ms Zaman's days as a post-graduate student, studying a Master's degree in Creative Writing at Lancaster University, UK (1999). That stay in England was also the inspiration for Ms Zaman's *I Am Muslim* collection, according to a radio interview from 2009. Need it be said that it is a very long way from Lancaster to Malaysia, and an even further distance, chronologically, from 1999 to 2012? It begs the question as to whether those fables from *King of the Sea* have travelled the distance well.

The first story in the volume tells of a controversial new kampong resident – Masbabu. She is seen brazenly arriving and setting up residence. She is driven there by a Sikh, the significance of which bypassed this reader. Masbabu is loud, colourful and seemingly shameless. Her manner, which is openly worldly, instantly upsets the village women. They appear plain and colourless in comparison to Masbabu. Things start to change in the village – for the better, maybe. Certainly there are changes for the husbands, who appear to regain their flagging libidos – much to the dismay of their wives. The wives and mothers are resistant to change. It is a simple tale, and in the colour of its telling resembles one of those populist films made by the Malay film director Mamat Khalid. There are a few holes in the story. What is the significance of the Sikh driver? Who really was Masbabu? Why did she come to that kampong and what was her real relationship with the Sikh? We shall never know and, like the village women in the story, can rely only upon conjecture and rural myth-making. You will have to read the story to see the anticlimactic ending, and ponder upon why it is anticlimactic.

The second story in Ms Zaman's collection, "And She Became an Angel," was originally translated into Indonesian by Dewi Anggraeni, and published in October 2002. I had a small difficulty with "And She Became an Angel," inasmuch as it felt as though this story should have been the lead in the volume *King of the Sea*. The character, Ipeng, a subsidiary character in "Masbabu," is one of the two main characters in "And She Became an Angel" – the "angel" in question being Ipeng's wife, Mandak. The order of those two stories just felt wrong, as if they should have been transposed, with the "angel" incident to the fore and what befell Ipeng in "Masbabu" following.

Further to Ms Zaman's Eros theme, there is a brief question of menopause in the story "And She Became an Angel" (40). When referring to the husband (Ipeng) and wife (Mandak), Ms Zaman informs the reader that "When they are lying in bed one night, he asks her if she has stopped having her periods. She makes an irritated noise, not unlike the squawks from their feathered friends." Are we to gather that what post dates this fragment of conversation is a by-product of post-menopause? Are those later actions menopausal psychosis perhaps, or by-products of Hippocrates's "hysteria" (via Sigmund Freud) – that ragbag of mysterious maladies which affects only the female of the species? The question is left hanging as to whether it is Mandak's

life, her boredom, her dissatisfaction, or a hormonal psychotic state which brings on the story's later tragicomedy – concluded in “Masbabu.”

We see inklings of that arch-inquirer and Sherlock Holmes enthusiast – Sigmund Freud – yet again, in Ms Zaman's “The Rainstorm.” In this story, two of the characters might have climaxed in the text but, for the reader, it is decidedly yet another anti-climax. The pace, which slowly hoicks up towards the end, leaves the reader flat, unsatisfied and badly in need of a cigarette (for those who smoke, or a cup of tea for those who don't). “The Rainstorm” is a short, short story and could have done with more build-up and a more conclusive resolution.

At the beginning of “The Rainstorm” one is reminded of Sigmund Freud's “Wolf Man” (*Der Wolfsmann*) essay, and the question of Freud's patient's unwitting voyeurism. There are no hanging fox's tails in Ms Zaman's story – just question marks. This link between Freud's thesis and Zaman's story is further heightened by her passage ‘Was it all a dream? A silly dream’ (63). Was this a sly nod to the “father” of psychoanalysis and his “dream work” then? Was it?

Death (Thanatos) comes to the kampong in the story, and title piece for the collection, “The King of the Sea.” This tale was previously published in *SARE* (*Southeast Asian Review of English*, 2004: 77-79), and confounds the non-Malay reader by using too many unexplained parochial words. Unfortunately, (as on page 92) this lack of communication tends to alienate the reader, creating distance between the reader and the text. This alienation is not Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (*the estrangement effect* as translated by John Willett), which prevents an audience from becoming too passive towards a work. Instead, the constant use of Malay and Arabic words confounds the reader, who, ultimately becomes too far distanced from the text to comprehend.

Zani's father is dead. There is no Oedipal triangle, no incestuous mother love, but rather illusion, delusion, insinuations of magic and a young child's tender state of grief. It is another simple account from Ms Zaman. It speaks of fragile mental states, seduction and perhaps reminiscences of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, or loss as defined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Swiss American Psychiatrist) in her five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the story, Zani seems to be stuck in denial. Zani imagines visualises, or hallucinates that he is visited by the King of the Sea. That entity either is, or is not his father. The description of the figure rising from the waves reminded this reader of Ian Fleming's Honey Ryder (Honeychile Rider in the novel), in Guy Hamilton's film of *Dr No* and, indeed the Fleming's book itself, but there the similarity ended. It could have been a more poignant moment. It could have been a “magical” moment, but it wasn't. Again the story felt truncated, too short for its own good.

Overall, I would not describe the few stories in this offering as “winsome” – with all due deference to the back cover of the book. This in itself is a little misleading as it refers to Ms Zaman’s previous contribution, *I Am Muslim* (2007). Not winsome, but perhaps – *wan*, as in lacking in forcefulness.

Ms Zaman’s bold attempts to impart a taste of magic realism into many on the stories become a mere mirage. The attempt is ephemeral, intangible – it does not go far enough. That attempt falters and dissipates like some Victorian conjurer’s smoke and mirrors. Sadly, Ms Zaman is no Borges, Salman Rushdie, or indeed Angela Carter. To reach those lofty heights Ms Zaman needs to attend to her craft a little more closely for her to get away with a dabble into magic realism. These stories of Ms Zaman’s lack the bite of Ms Carter’s, lack Ms Carter’s edginess and sensuous depth.

May I reiterate – there is a strong need for fresh editing of these tales, a) to enhance their flavour, and b) to correct some of the all too obvious errors in the text. Though I do acknowledge Ms Zaman’s history of pubescent stays in the US of A, I would further question the use of Americanisms within these stories. Words such as “Movies” instead of “Films” or “Cinema” seem a tad out of place in accounts about a country, and countryside, in which British English, not American English, is the second language.

If this book were to be reprinted, either as a physical book or an e-book, outside of Malaysia, one might hope that a glossary of Malay terms might be included in a future volume, for those not well versed in the Malay language. It would give this collection a wider audience than the current English reading residents of Malaysia, for many others may not be familiar with such terms as – *syirik*, *baju kurung* and *bomoh* (all found on one page 55).

The tales presented in *King of the Sea* are not without charm, or indeed hope. Re-edited, fleshed out and re-presented, these stories could become award winners – just not yet.

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