

Claire Tham, *The Inlet*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 371 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-7384-7.

Over the last few decades fiction has become the “voice” that creatively presents the changing faces of cultures and societies of the Asian world. Fiction is not only generating a massive reading market but also a large base of new authorship from across continents. While reading through new novels that are presented as an offshoot of reality, one wonders what makes the writers choose fiction as the medium of expression? Perhaps, authors/narrators have a genuine story to share which could spill the beans of controversy if narrated through non-fictional modes? Perhaps, fiction gives the ease to these voices to experiment with facts and data, and narrate their own stories of change? The lives of people, and especially those of the diasporic citizens of Asia have acquired larger than life socio-cultural significance, which perhaps might be captured securely only through the fictional frames.

However, when it comes to the sub-genres of crime thrillers and whodunit stories within the broader fictional genre, the readers still look up to the West to provide a suitable template. Crime novels invite the peril of being judged by a set of extreme factors; gripping narration, fast-paced action, a nail-biting storyline, strong characters, the motive behind a crime and an interesting plot that is capable of capturing the attention of an audience. These novels are expected to invite the reader into their dark world full of surprise and mystery. They entangle the readers in their mind games until the last page of the book. Claire Tham’s book *The Inlet* is a crime-based novel that swings somewhere between historico-cultural commentary on the one hand and pulp narration on the other. Unlike the available templates of thriller fiction, Tham’s book presents a subtle, analytical story whose approach seems to be not the “hows” and “what nexts,” but rather through the “why” of a crime. Tham investigates the death of a young female Chinese national living in Singapore. She pieces together a variety of social, cultural and individual reasons that might have led to her death in the novel.

The novel presents an attempt to construct a story of contemporary Singapore, while simultaneously dealing (glossing over) with the rapidly changing face of China in the recent decades. The fluid and fast-changing definition of “home” and the boundaries between home and the economic needs that drives young Asians out of their small villages or towns in search of the world is the focal thread of the novel. The story bridges across nations: China, Singapore, India, which are tied by the call of migration and trade. Singapore is presented in the novel as the brewing cosmopolitan haven for young South and Southeast Asian working nationals. However, the flip side of the coin of development of nations is that individuals and cultures undergo a

massive transformation. Do individuals need to pay a price for choosing to be global citizens? This question seems to define the philosophical core of the novel.

The text deals with multiple layers of socio-cultural changes occurring in Singapore. Tham builds the story out of the unnatural death (by drowning) of a young Chinese girl, Wang Ling in the swimming pool of the residence of a billionaire estate baron Willy Gan. The story moves back and forth as a flash-back through a series of events and a series of people that might have directly or indirectly played a role culminating in the death of Ling. Jasper Gan, the nephew of Willy Gan, is somehow connected to the mysterious death of the girl. The investigating officer in Ling's case, Cheung Fai, plays a central role in the novel as he slowly pieces together several fragments of evidences, events, and people in the form of a pastiche to build the story of Ling's death. Unlike many other thriller novels that focus on the complexity of the plot, *The Inlet* builds its story from a series of psychological reflections on the major characters and their voices in the novel. Each chapter is named after a certain character or a place. The story moves back and forth in a complex web-like narrative structure reflecting varied perspectives of the different characters that are somehow connected with Ling and her death.

There are multiple thematic threads in the story that cut across the core plot surrounding the murder; estate mafia, diasporic problems connected to hierarchy in Asian migrants, traditions versus globalisation, the complex nature of languages, family and the individual, relationships, prostitution and life of single working women living in Singapore. The novel particularly focuses on the issues of women migrant workers, their lives, insecurities, dreams and frustrations, and their ambitions of being a part of a highly demanding male-centric world. Designed as a tale of suspense, emotion and high drama, *The Inlet* as its blurb suggests, is "based loosely on a true incident." The novel invites its readers to experience the rapidly changing cultural trends in and around South and Southeast Asia. It appears to underscore the idea that geographical borders which were an important point of reference in the twentieth century, have now given way to a highly globalised, mechanised East that has to cope with its own set of turbulent issues in the wake of changing individual and family equations.

In *The Inlet*, there are thin lines of demarcation between fiction and reality and it appears as though reality can be stranger than fiction. The essayist G.K. Chesterton had once reflected in his book *Heretics* that, "People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature; people wonder why it is read more than books of science or books of metaphysics. The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are" (96-97). *The Inlet* tries to keep itself as "true" and faithful to reality as possible. However, there are a few drawbacks of the novel. In its attempt to remain faithful to reality, the narration appears at times to be too strained, to the point that the effort

becomes clearly visible. The suspense and the thriller elements at certain points in the story get sabotaged by its historical and cultural commentaries on globalised Asia. Even though the story is recounted by an omniscient narrator; the multiple characters, their lives, their background often strain the flow of the narration and distract the reader from the central event of the story. The reader might be left wandering about the connection of a certain character and their background with Ling and her death. There is a sense of an abruptness in which a character is introduced and removed from the story, such that one is left wandering as to the purpose of their presence in the novel. For example, the character of Jasper's mother or the character of Sanjana are abruptly introduced and taken away from the novel.

The character of Ling hardly emerges with clarity. There is no certainty regarding her intentions of choosing flesh trade and quick money in a salon in Singapore over the work that she was already doing in a small laboratory in China as an assistant. The "integrity" of her character does not emerge as strongly as one would wish for and the novel when it reaches its conclusion fails to generate empathy towards the death of a girl who is bound to leave home because of her circumstances. Ling appears as a girl who is driven by her ambitions for a lifestyle rather than by the necessity for earning a "respectable" income. Her character is sketchy and appears rather shady and subtly implicated in the darker sides of ambition. At certain junctures in the novel, she appears as driven by a search for adventure in the pure boredom and monotony of life. She lies to her parents about getting a high-paying research job in a huge lab at Singapore, breaks-up her engagement easily, and moves to work in a night-club at Singapore, earns more money than the other girls in the club. It is difficult to empathise with Ling at many junctures of the novel. Ling's tragedy is more of a personal failure of judgment rather than a moment that might arouse universal empathy. In critical terms, the sense of *catharsis* or purgation of emotions (that Aristotle talks of in his characterization of great tragedy) is not what one feels when reading through Ling's destiny in the novel.

She painted a picture of a lab of unsurpassed sophistication, with state of the art equipment and a workforce from all over the world. Details of the drug she recited from an article she found on the internet. Not having previously had much occasion to lie, she's surprised by her facility for it: the sustained fabrications, the absolute lack of compunction she feels. (And Jiang? – Ah Jiang – She lets her parents down as gently as she knows how.) Dimply, she perceives that one day these lies will, *must*, unravel, but there's still a part of her that hopes it won't come to that.... (123)

As a novel, *The Inlet* is an average read. The story is interesting and the critical insight into contemporary Singaporean life is penetrating. However, the characters, the sequence of events, and the narration fail to completely engross

the reader in the saga. I was still left desiring for the pleasures of a dramatic crime fantasy that would completely make me forget the ticking of the clock or the world around while reading *The Inlet*.

Works Cited

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