

Jane Nardin, *Little Women in India*. Berkshire: New Dawn Publishers Ltd., 2012. 252 pp. ISBN 9781-908462-07-7.

When Jane Nardin read from her novel, *Little Women in India*, at the book launch on 21 May 2012 at National University of Singapore, I listened somewhat distractedly because I was emcee for the event. My mind was preoccupied with what I had to say next rather than focus on what was being read out on stage. All I heard was a voice that was very English but spoke of an Indian setting. This unmistakable “mash-up” (“The Literary Mash-up”) was what drew me to the novel in the first instance. Then, I was drawn to the interesting cover of the paperback which featured four English teenage girls placed against the backdrop of structures that approximated Hindu temples, and a landscape that was predominantly tangerine. The sisters were imaged as preoccupied with themselves, evident from how they looked in different directions (like in a group picture in which each individual has been photographed separately).

The epigraph, “Books are made out of other books,” identifies the “germ” of the novel. Jane Nardin’s *Little Women in India* closely follows the plotline of May Louisa Alcott’s *Little Women*. The occasion of war, the dampened Christmas celebrations, the gift of a copy of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* for each of the four girls, the sharing of Christmas breakfast with a needy family, amateur theatricals, the father’s illness and the mother’s journey to attend to him, are some direct links between the plots of the two novels. Further, the temperament and afflictions of the four girls, their various romantic entanglements and the watchful mother hoping for “proper” marriages for her daughters, are ideas that build the framework of the novel.

However, what gives the novel its uniqueness is the way the author wittily provides an interesting and a tragicomic twist to the plot of romance and marriage. The family with many daughters is a familiar stock theme in 19th Century English Literature, but Jane Nardin’s cleverness in incorporating these well-known ideas into her 21st Century novel goes a long way to generate a fresh look at what happens to individuals and their sense of identity when they are forcibly brought face to face with cultural otherness in a mutating political landscape. The lives of the May sisters are transformed when they are caught in the midst of the first major nationalist uprising in India against the colonising British, the so-called “Sepoy Mutiny,” in 1857.

The novel perceptively portrays how the constricting but protected lives of the four sisters undergo a sea-change with the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny. Overnight, the sisters are torn away from their comfortable bungalow in Shivapur and huddled in a washerman’s cart with heavy loads of clothes thrown over to hide them from the fury of mutineers. The journey down the road, across the jungle and down the river to Murarmau is narrated without the

metaphorical aura that is conventionally seen in many narratives of journey. This journey is literal and replete with the immediate fears of detection and death. The literalness with which the journey is described gives an immediacy to the experiences, and the anxieties of displacement and loss of identity come alive not only for the sisters but also for the readers.

Even though the story is contextualised in the Sepoy Mutiny, the mutiny itself is only incidental to the novel. The historical event triggers latent questions pertaining to racial, cultural and religious differences, and visibly transforms the way in which the sisters perceive British colonising mission in India. During their lives away from their Shivapur home, the four sisters come face to face with poverty, illness, betrayal and violence in ways that compel them to critically think about the moral correctness of the Empire's rule in the colonies.

However, what makes *Little Women in India* a 21st Century novel is that it is able to take the readers beyond this postcolonial dimension, and explore issues that are central to a globalised world. The novel successfully depicts a world that is caught in a state of political, cultural and religious flux that re-orders how individuals view themselves in relation to the world they live in. Many of these ideas are foreshadowed in the initial pages of the novel with a disarming simplicity that is the hallmark of Jane Nardin's writing of this novel. The introductory paragraphs of the novel foreground the distance between the coloniser and the colonised in the following terms:

Shivapur's English families lived in the 'civil lines,' where the wide streets were laid out in a rigid grid pattern. Through the fresh, green branches of the neem trees that fringed the Mays' lawn, several stately bungalows could be glimpsed. The crowded, disorderly native district, with its twisting alleyways, was not visible. Nor was the cantonment, where a regiment of native soldiers and their English officers lived in barracks. (*Little Women* 1)

The invisibility of the native district and the cantonment symbolises the sisters' obliviousness to the Empire's relationship with the colonised. In this situation, the lives of the sisters revolve around acts of philanthropy like taking their basket of goodies to Pushpa and her son on Christmas morning or paying neighbourly visits to Ali who has fallen ill. In the amateur theatricals, the sisters stage their questions about the relationship between the *sahib* and the *sepoys*, but they are quite unaware of the real gap that exists between the English and the native populations. The bookish nature of their knowledge about colonies is revealed in a casual meeting with the native women. On her way to meet Ali who has fallen ill, Catherine comes upon a group of native women drawing water from the tank (54). She waves to them but many of them do not respond.

This experience at once fills Catherine with fear of latent hate that the natives may conceal against the colonisers.

The interesting twist in plot is that none of their fears come true. While fear of discovery and violent death always inform their actions and movements when they live in hiding, two of the sisters come close to death only once, and most interestingly, the physical combat is so described in these parts of the novel as to foreground the native's capacity for fidelity rather than his hostility.

Therefore, the main point of the novel is to explore identities that are born when borders collapse. If borderlands give birth to opinions based on race, religious beliefs and cultural otherness, evident in the way Mrs May speaks of the quelling of the Mutiny as the Saviour's blasting of the heathen and blessing of the English army (249), overlooking these lines enables the birth of a new perception of connecting in a world with negotiable borders. Fanny is sad to be separated from the Simhas and actively decides to send them some money from her father's newfound fortune; Catherine hopes that Ali will return to them some day; and Elizabeth's snappy rejoinder to Jane's query if Susan Brown's nose was red is telling: "Of course it was. And what does it matter what color her nose is anyway?" (249).

Works Cited

"The Literary Mash-up." *Huff Post Books*. 13 Nov. 2013.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jane-nardin/the-literary-mashup_b_2194133.html.

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