

Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2010. 328 pp. ISBN 978-981-4302-71-5.

The idea of Asian English writing emerged in an embryonic form in a symposium held at the University of Hong Kong (27-30 April 1990) as a follow-up to Han Suyin's lectures in 1988 to mark the 50 years' work of British Council in Hong Kong. Less than a decade later, in a 1998 paper titled "English as an Asian Language,"¹ Braj B. Kachru, a noted exponent of world "englishes," argued for canonicity and institutionalisation of English in Asia on the grounds of its prolonged presence in crucial functional domains, its local adaptation and the resultant acculturation. Now, twelve years down the line, Mohammad A Quayum has compiled twenty-five short stories about Asia and Asians in English. The point of the editorial exercise in this ground-breaking anthology of modest and manageable heft (which makes it suitably consumable and reader-friendly) is to proffer the current flavour of the new genre described as Asian short stories in English. The insightful – indeed, very refreshing – collection completes the gestation of the Asian canon by showcasing the richness and diversity of Asian experiences and giving a boost and visibility to the promising new talents in the form of publication opportunity and access to the public space.

The fact that the transplantation of English in large regions of Asia has survived decolonisation and has further seeped into the linguistic repertoire of the continent's ex-colonies as well as uncolonised parts is evidenced by the extensive creativity in the language. The elegance and felicities of articulation in these stories by writers from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines as well as from Laos, Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates demonstrate how English has become a supple medium for cultural representation despite its variegated growth, varying status and uneven social penetration in the Asian countries. Of the twenty-five short stories in the collection, Pakistani and Filipino authors have two each, Singaporeans three, Bangladeshis four, Indians seven, while the contributors from Taiwan, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia and the UAE have one each. Of the remaining two, one is by a Guyanese Indian, Sasenarine Persaud, and the other by an American, George Polley, now settled in Japan.

As chroniclers of Asian experience these writers have tapped into their roots and belonging and turned in fresh facets and perspectives within pointed narrative formats. The opening story, "Dreamscapes: Ma Vie En Rouge," by

¹ Braj B. Kachru, "English as an Asian Language." *Links & Letters* 5 (1998): 89-108.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan straddles the cultures of Pakistan and the USA. In her first-person voice the narrator recounts her passing infatuation with the heady fads of feminism, lesbianism and gay rights but, at the same time, she detracts from the crazy notions as she has breathed liberation in her middle-class, urban Pakistani upbringing and, sure enough, longs for the bliss of the conjugal box. The author is a US-based professional academic of Pakistani origin. While weaving her plot, she obliquely talks shop, but the descriptive details are not shop-soiled. The creative trajectory is sufficiently controlled. The random dream shots get spliced, whereby the story attains a pleasing coherence.

The Asian locale is palpable in a story by another Pakistani writer, Qaisra Shahraz. In "The Zemindar's Wife," she depicts a grasping, avaricious landlord whose feudal proclivities are checkmated by his pretty, and seemingly innocuous, wife. Concealing his chicanery and greed, the Zemindar, Sarfaraz Jahangir, invites his fellow villagers to periodic dinners and coaxes his beautiful but cold and disdainful wife, Noor, into doing the honours. However, the reluctant hostess does not look the part while welcoming the compliant villagers. Unlike the submissive Kaniz, her son, Younis, a student of Lahore's Punjab University, detests obsequious obedience imposed on the villagers by the domineering landlord. The Zemindar suspects defiance in Younis's absence from lavish Friday feasts. When Noor discovers that her husband's dissembling hospitality is designed for grabbing the villagers' land for bauxite mining, she gets furious at the unfair deal. Things come to a head with Younis meeting his death in an accident and Sarfaraz hosting the mourning meals for the villagers. Noor decides to visit the grieving family and gets to know that Kaniz's land documents are lying in the Zemindar's custody. This information is casually slipped in, but Noor grows into womanhood, organises a grand event to return the land deeds to the assembled women and thus turns the tables on her slimy husband.

Like "The Zemindar's Wife," most of the short stories in this collection have substantial plot dynamics, narrative verve and a tactile feel of the setting with stylistic aplomb. "Breakfast with the Fugitives" by Xerxes Matza and "Celery, Tulips and Hummingbirds" by Linda Tye-Casper, dealing with the themes of filial estrangement and avuncular ties respectively, capture slivers of the Filipino culture, particularly the latter is redolent of the spirit of place and a triumph of local colour. English reached the Philippines in 1898, with the United States supporting the Philippine Revolution against Spain and eventually colonising this Asian country from 1905 to 1946. Compared to the extent of British rule and colonisation of India, where the first published work in English by an Indian writer dates back to 1794,² the Philippines had a relatively short

² Fakrul Alam, "Introduction." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 323: South Asian Writers in English. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006: xv.

spell of colonial encounter – shorter than that in Malaysia and Singapore, where the arm of the power of Britain reached as early as 1824 although the first volume of short stories in English was published in Singapore by Catherine Lim only in 1978. However, irrespective of the way the language has reached, grown and flourished on the continent, the locally inflected content and representational exactitude of the stories in Quayum’s collection give the impression that English is not alien to the social matrix whether the writer in this anthology is negotiating the situation in Laos, Vietnam and Taiwan or whether s/he is depicting the scenes of India, Malaysia or Bangladesh.

While all the short stories in this anthology are viable narratives, the two that stand out from the lot, to my mind, are “Seiji” by George Polley and “The Gourd Seller” by Abha Iyengar. Polley’s story is about an artist who grew up and spent his life in the Asakusa district of Tokyo, Japan. With his intimate and persistent grasp of the devastating violence in the aftermath of the Second World War, the artist responds creatively to the given reality and looks beyond the ravaged remains around him for light and life. Along another track of violence, Iyengar’s story, set in the Indian city of Kanpur, depicts a Hindu widow, Reena’s strange fascination for Altaf, the gourd seller, who falls victim to communal violence. The story exudes the local aroma and ambience and the literal translation of Reena’s outbursts has unmistakable Indian flavour.

Taken together, the vitality and innovative initiatives of the pieces included in this anthology do provide a measure of how English is getting acculturated and pressed into the service of Asian contexts on Asian terms, showing up its various strands outside the core Anglophone group. The editor’s attempt seeks to anchor and extend the contextualisation of English, which, as a neutral language among competing native tongues, seems to have become one of the pan-Asian languages of creativity for articulating local identities. “No pretender,” in fact, as the *Economist* puts it, “is pan-regional enough”³ in Asia.

In addition to the quality and variety of the compiled stories, Quayum’s well-written, comprehensive Introduction is very useful. With a concise and critically measured account of the field of English language-based writing in Asia and of the short story’s formal development, he gives a crisp overview of the canon ahead. The Introduction also aims at promoting the creative gains and uses of the unimpeded spread of English at various levels by making it a medium for sharing globally Asian values and pragmatic realities.

While the real virtues of *A Rainbow Feast* are obvious, and Marshall Cavendish does indeed deserve kudos for its efficient production, there are a few minor details to quibble about. The term *Freytag’s Triangle* (in page 21), in my view, should have been briefly explicated. Gustav Freytag’s method of analysing plots, derived from Aristotle’s concept of unity of action, has also

³ “The Future of English: English as She was Spoke.” *The Economist*, 18 Dec. 2010: 155.

come to be known as *Freytag's Pyramid* (1863). Also, in an introductory discussion of the short story as a genre, I think it is relevant to mention Brander Matthews' "The Philosophy of the Short Story" (1901). Interestingly, Matthews, the American professor of dramatic literature, is supposed to be the first one to name the emerging genre "short story." In addition, a few typographical errors will need to be weeded out in the next print of the volume, such as "multi-dialectical" (12) instead of multidialectal, "conversion" (25) instead of conversation, "wrangle" (31) instead of wangle, "breath" (251) instead of breathe. This cavilling, however, does not detract from the editor's solid contribution to the canonisation of Asian writings in English.

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