

Cyril Wong, *The Last Lesson of Mrs De Souza*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2013. 147 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-6232-2.

Cyril Wong's first novel, *The Last Lesson of Mrs De Souza*, is a deceptively simple novel, which tells a potent story about shaping of young minds through the system called school education. The story is primarily about two characters, Rose De Souza and Amir. Mrs Rose De Souza, a retiring school teacher, talks about her experiences of teaching adolescent boys as a secondary school educator, and particularly about Amir, one of her students from yesteryears. At the beginning of the novel, we see Mrs De Souza getting ready to go to school one last time before she retires. The narrative takes us back and forth through the life story of this character on the basis of what she does and thinks over a period of one working day. The reader walks down memory lane with Mrs De Souza as she prepares to go to school in the morning, does what she has to do in school during the day, and leaves her school for the last time at the end of the day. In the course of her narrative, she recollects selective moments of her life that reflect the complexities of her various relationships, particularly her encounter with Amir who speaks to her about his sexual orientation. She decides to revisit her brief but intense involvement in Amir's life by telling her students parts of his story, but her narrative is interspersed with her doleful recollections of many moments of unhappiness and longing in her empty life. Such sequencing effectively foregrounds the importance of non-linear nature of human progression into perceiving the self. So, while Mrs De Souza is getting ready to teach her students on her last day in the school as teacher, the narrative prepares the readers to recognise the lesson that Mrs De Souza will be forced to learn on her last day at school.

Significantly, the last day of school falls on her birthday, a day when she, like many of us, hopes to receive good wishes and thoughtful gifts. However, Mrs De Souza's husband is dead, she has no children, and she doesn't seem to have any friends. She is ageing and she is alone. The stage is well set for serious moral questioning. Her ruminations about her long career as a school teacher are attempts to come to terms with her moral practices as a teacher. She arrives in the classroom and tells her students that she will not teach from the school syllabus; instead, she will tell them a story. The story she tells the boys is the story of Amir. Amir has discovered that he is gay and is afraid that his sexual orientation will cause him immense trouble. He shares his story with Mrs De Souza not so much for advice but to share this mammoth secret with someone. Mrs De Souza is pleased that he had chosen to share his story with her, and wants to make a difference in his life. Things begin to go wrong when against better judgement, she decides to share this secret with Amir's father. She seems to strongly believe that the father will be able to help his son face his situation.

On the contrary, the revelation of Amir's secret devastates his father and grandmother (Amir's mother is dead) and Amir commits suicide.

In her decision to recount Amir's tragic story to her last batch of boys, Mrs De Souza is trying to come to terms with her unacknowledged guilt at what came to pass: "I wish I had been braver and more attentive. It's not as if I never stood up for what I believed in, but I think it could have done more" (29). While she never doubts the moral correctness of her decision to speak about Amir's feelings to his father, she is unable to rationalise her part in Amir's decision to kill himself. This is why there is always a gap between what she means to say to the boys and what she actually says.

Such gaps in Rose De Souza's "rambling soliloquy" (17) are filled by memories from the past. As she speaks to her students, she is reminded of many of her sorrows – the failed marriage of her parents, her stormy relationship with her mother, her childlessness and inability to cope with her husband's death, and even the effects of her Eurasian upbringing on her relationship with the students. Her unfortunate experiences have made her insecure and concerned about what people think of her. She is inordinately conscious about what she wears and how she walks, how she styles her hair and nails or even how her neighbours perceive her solitude.

Whenever she is in doubt of what she should think, she imagines that Christopher, her dead husband, has come to guide her. This is her coping mechanism to wade through the series of anxieties that inform her moral questionings of her past behaviour. At these points, she wonders if Christopher would approve of what she is thinking, and she always concludes that he would. She concludes in this way possibly because she believes that only an individual who is going through an experience can understand the issues and fix his/her problems (23). But this turns out to be her self-created fantasy because she does not apply the same principle to real life situations of other people around her.

Mrs De Souza is telling her students, and by implication the readers, her version of what happened, what she considers the truth, and this is problematised in the narrative. The climax of the novel is couched in a letter she finds while clearing her desk before leaving school. It is a letter from Amir, written and stashed in her drawer in the weekend before he killed himself. The letter opens up the final complex thread in the dialogue that Mrs De Souza has had with her students, and in the process, with herself. Speaking to the students makes her believe that she has apologised to Amir for the mistake that she made in his case, and in this way, put the incident behind her. But Amir's letter reveals to her a new perspective of her identity as a teacher:

This is the missing piece that was left out of my narrative. Its ending has now changed; and with no more boys before me to hear it now, nobody left to listen to my revised and final lesson.... Instead I am left alone in this

classroom to contemplate the new conclusion to a story I foolishly thought
I could put behind me. (145)

The Last Lesson of Mrs De Souza is contextualised in a society that is fraught with stressful day-to-day living. It boldly portrays the overwhelming predominance of dysfunctional families, broken relationships, and withdrawn individuals in a highly systematised society, and through such a social context, the novel hopes to raise reader awareness about silences, gaps and conscious oversights in the perception of life's challenges, particularly for young minds. The novel calls for a change in the ways we think of freedom, individual merit, feelings, emotional relationships, and above all, personal identity. It also questions the devastating importance given to economic success and global relevance in contemporary times, and by such questioning, implies the need for a sincere peek at what makes human beings a cohesive warm-hearted community. At the end of the novel, as Mrs De Souza drives out from the school compound, unable to come to terms with Amir's bitterness at her actions, she fills the reader with a terrifying sense of emptiness. It is a powerful ending to a novel that sensitises us to the need to nurture a society in which children can express themselves freely and develop into emotionally healthy adults.

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