

Matthew Thomas, *Anakara House*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014. 207 pp. ISBN 9789833221462.

Anakara House surprised me. Having read the blurb on the back cover, I was expecting to follow the story of one particular character as he seeks to find roots within his diasporic experience. I did not expect that this fairly short novel would manage to contain what is in essence quite an action-packed family saga, through which the diasporic journey of one man is then examined. The book is thoughtful but also surprisingly thrilling.

Thomas writes about an ethno-religious group which is probably not that familiar to most Malaysians – Syrian Christians from Kerala, in South India. Thomas himself is from that group, and therefore is able to write about them with the authority of familiarity. With this, he combines his legal expertise; most of the conflicts and machinations in the novel arise from legal wranglings about property and ownership.

The narrator of the novel is the grandson of the patriarch/owner of *Anakara House* in Kerala. The house is a kind of patriarchal seat, the centre around which the entire family must revolve, and which should pass down the patriarchal line. The narrator's grandfather, Kochachen, is worried because his son is away, working in Burma; what, he worries, will happen when he passes away? If his son is not there, then Kochachen's scheming nephews will wrest the property away from him. This is where the various legal shenanigans begin. A caretaker is installed, a Nepalese soldier, who eventually claims squatter's rights. He is ousted by Kochachen's brother-in-law, an army man, who then decides that he himself can claim the house. All is eventually sorted out, after a fashion, by the narrator, the diasporic man who eventually finds his roots back in Kerala, at the ancestral home.

One of the points Thomas makes in this novel is the need to be emotionally and physically engaged with the home. Titus, the brother-in-law, despairs because he sees so many ancestral properties

deteriorating for want of care, yet not one of the absentee beneficiaries would sell or forfeit their rights to others. Instead, they clung on to them, although unwilling to abandon the glamour and money they made in Britain or America, and exchange all that for a lonely farmer's life in their village. They would talk proudly and emotionally about their ancestral property, whilst neglecting it. (35)

Titus begins his involvement with the house with noble enough intentions – to see to it that it does not fall into disrepair through this kind of neglect.

The narrator's father, Chacko, is one of these absentee landlords. He spends his entire adult life away from the house, returning only to visit his father. He also makes it a point to send his son Jimmy to England to study engineering. In the lives of both these men, we see the pull between their various homes. Chacko feels his responsibility to his home, but is unable to actually go back and settle down. Standing at the gate of the house now occupied by Titus, he "felt as though he had no history left in Anakara. He had become a product of a colonial venture" (38). Ultimately unable to fight his aggressive brother-in-law for possession of the house, he moves instead to Malaya. He is obsessed with the house and the idea of return, but he dies in Malaya, rootless and dispossessed. He seems weakened, rendered vulnerable, because he has nowhere that he seems able to call his own. His obsession with Anakara House means that he cannot make the emotional leap that would be required for him to call Malaya home.

The narrator, Jimmy, is even more displaced than his father. He grows up in Burma, then spends years living and working in England. He even marries an English girl, though his parents refuse to acknowledge the marriage or refer to his wife by name. His life in England seems idyllic, but it is disrupted when his firm sends him to Malaya for a while. There, he reunites with his parents, and hears more from them about Anakara House and its central importance to their family. He begins, through this reunion, to reconnect with his ancestral home; inevitably, this also begins to distance him from his English idyll. His mother's objections to his English wife begin to take root in Jimmy's mind, although Jane is at this point portrayed as rather sympathetic and supportive. But when they go to India together, they find that their relationship cannot survive outside the specific cultural milieu of London. In Malaya, Jimmy becomes aware of

... the absolute loneliness of people who emigrate, leaving their homes, loved ones and cultures in the pursuit of an adventure or out of necessity, and then silently obsess about their past that only exists in their mind. (87)

This is Chacko's state – cut off, but unable to cut ties, thinking only of the times when Kochachen was in charge of Anakara.

Jimmy could easily have followed suit – cut off from England by the breakdown of his relationship with Jane, he could have ended up drifting from place to place. He stops himself from falling into that state by deliberately engaging with his past, and working to retrieve Anakara house from the usurpers. The machinations over the house are rather sordid – cheating, legal games, corruption, murder, rape, abuse, adultery. But they do underline the absolute importance of possession of land within this culture. Titus has another home. But his possession of Anakara House becomes part and parcel of his

drive towards power and wealth, because of its position as the home of the leading family in the area.

If Jimmy finally succeeds at taking back his ancestral home and thus restoring it to its rightful lineage, I would suggest that it is because his position as a diasporic man actually lends him the requisite distance to see things more rationally. He does not hunger for power or wealth; and he does not have the same emotional connection with the house that his father had. He is there mainly for his father's sake, so his focus is on the house and the village, rather than on himself. He takes a rational decision to become a part of the complex socio-political network of the house and the village, and thus finally finds somewhere to put down roots. But at the end, he remains aware that his "ownership" of the house can, after all, only be temporary. This is perhaps a melancholy reflection, but again it serves to give him a perspective that eluded both Kochachen and Chacko in their obsession over the house.

While the novel ends on a quiet, reflective note, it is a well-paced, sometimes slightly racy book which makes an easy, pleasant, but still thoughtful read. Its message of engagement and commitment with the home is an important one for the diasporic community in Malaysia as well.

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