

**Ashraf Jamal and Shanti Moorthy, ed. *Silverfish New Writing 7*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2007. 192 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-20-2.**

The latest collection of short stories in *Silverfish New Writing 7* is a commendable collection of slice of life vignettes of various themes and trajectories. While written by a selection of writers coming from diverse backgrounds – law, literature, linguistics, and chemical engineering, to name a few – the Asian settings which dominate the stories highlight the primary preoccupation with homelands. These writers articulate the postmodern condition of 21<sup>st</sup> century globalised citizens as they cross physical and imagined borders. Stories of successful and failed transnational relationships, awareness of sexual freedom and orientations, marked generational differences between diasporic parents and doubly displaced children, nostalgic reminiscences of loved ones departed are some of the issues that preoccupy the collection. They illuminate the lived realities of many contemporary Asians: peoples of diasporic communities remembering old pasts, re-visiting roots and origins, renewing old ties, and adapting to new beliefs and practices.

Some of the more memorable stories are “Beer in Fukuoka,” “Dog Hot Pot,” “The Morning After,” “That Smile, and the Tilt of her Head,” “Departing Ways,” “A Writers Monologue” and “The First Time.” I shall highlight two stories in particular to exhibit the ways in which Asians have crossed borders and practises.

“Beer in Fukuoka” tells a story of Loh Hwee Min, a young officer who shelves her honeymoon plans to accommodate her work schedule. She is about to get married and has to postpone her honeymoon to accommodate a Japan trip, much to her future husband’s disappointment. The narrative works on two levels: one shows the detachment Hwee Min demonstrates as she prepares for her wedding, and the other is the warm memories she re-lives of her Japanese ex-lover and hairdresser, a man from Fukuoka. The two men are pitted as opposites: on the one hand, her future husband, Phillip, is overtly romantic, organised and predictable; on the other, her ex-lover, Seiji, was down-to-earth, impulsive and unpredictable. Seiji’s little room where Hwee Min had spent her time brought more happiness than her bridal bed, a palatial suite at a five-star hotel as she rues the choice she has made: “She looked at the pale sky burdened by its company of dark clouds. She listened to Phillip’s breathing. It is the sound, she tells herself, of a person who is unworried by the sum of all that has become irrelevant or impossible, unburdened by the sunken freight of the past, the dense vapour of dreams” (18). Hwee Min does not typify the happy bride, but is weighed down by her previous relationship, knowing that simplicities and impulsiveness have become things of the past.

“Dog Hot Pot” is a humorous story of a food scholar, Christopher, who investigates the strange dietary partiality of Chinese people, based on a report that

Chinese people are fond of eating domesticated animals, dogs and cats, as gourmet food. He finds the eating preference repugnant and savage. As a Chinese Singaporean studying for his doctorate in Wisconsin and married to a vegetarian Irish American, Nancy, Christopher displays the typical character of a diasporic individual – one who finds certain ancestral customs repulsive and wants to sever relations with such practices. Christopher’s preoccupation brings him back to Singapore where he catches up with family members and friends. Here, we see the way in which Christopher is alienated from them. At dinner time, for example, his father rants: “Who told you to marry a foreigner? You make your own life so complicated” (30). The diasporic father who has made Singapore his home finds it difficult to reconcile with the interests and pursuits of his doubly diasporic son who has made America his new home. This generational gap is also obvious in another story in the collection, “The Vortex,” a story of an aged and poor Chinese father who discovers with revulsion that his much-loved son is engaged in a homosexual relationship with a balding Caucasian man. Crossing physical borders, the two stories also show how they have defied and defiled Asian values and norms.

Indeed, *Silverfish New Writing 7* shows that new writings out of and about Southeast Asia are alive and thriving. The vibrancy of the narratives with its myriad of trajectories promise a bright future for this corpus to grow and develop further. Amir Muhammad (2001) once labelled Malaysian Literature in English as a wounded bird but the Malaysians who contributed to the collection show themselves to be writers in the making. Equally satisfying is to see the works of Singaporean, Indian and other writers in the volume, whose works reflect the richness, diversities and complexities of our contemporary realities.

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