

Che Husna Azhari, *An English Sojourn*. Selangor, Malaysia: Furada, 2008. 200pp. ISBN 978-983-99748-7-4.

After three works of fiction written in English, Che Husna Azhari delights us yet again with her new collection of short stories, *An English Sojourn*. Written over three decades, with a few of them already published, the stories retain their relevance, liveliness, and cheerful tone. This collection of twelve stories constitutes a seemingly quasi-autobiographical narrative, with all the stories being written in the first person. The narrative voice is that of the adult woman that has been the young, vibrant Malay student in England: the book then represents a retrieval of selective moments and experiences, scripted into meaningful episodes of diverse range and tonalities.

While most of Azhari's previous narratives are set in Malaysia, specifically in her native Kelantan, the new collection, as the title suggests, takes place in England, during the author's stay there doing undergraduate and graduate studies culminating in her PhD in engineering sciences. The setting here represents a critical factor in appreciating Azhari's discourse in this collection. Being so far away from her roots, immersed in an entirely different milieu, gives the narrator a fresh way of seeing her Malaysian cultural context. Specifically, it allows the narrator the opportunity to meet students from other Muslim countries, especially those coming from the Middle East.

All the stories are set primarily on university campuses in England. These campuses become an inspiring terrain for intra-Muslim encounters amongst young students – the emerging, educated elites of their respective societies. The locus thus accords the narrator an opening for life-long friendships and profound, transformative experiences. The students, with whom the narrator-protagonist comes into contact, have to cope with their exilic condition, each according to his or her own way. Moreover, they have to face the challenges of pursuing higher learning, on which their private careers as well as the future of their families and countries depend. Accordingly, many of the students depicted in this narrative develop warm and empathetic bonds with other fellow Muslim students. These bonds enhance their identitarian affiliation with a common faith and culture and assume a vital value during moments of stress and hardship.

On such academic grounds, these ambitious scholars and researchers develop bonds that transcend their societal reservation and prejudices about Muslims from other backgrounds. Here the British university's campus mosque assumes the prominence of being the centre of significant pan-Islamic transactions among students. As the narrator puts subtly and movingly:

We did not recognize partisan Islam, we were not divided by *madhab*. We did not squabble over prayer times, or how much water to use during *wudhu*, or whether to fold our arms or to let them hang loose in prayer. We just became Muslims, made *wudhu*, performed prayers, broke fasts, like it was meant to be. (162)

In several stories a bonding develops between the narrator-protagonist and female students from other Muslim countries, as in the heart-warming story “The Running People” where she develops a deep friendship with the Iraqi Umm Hussein, who has fled with her husband from Saddam Hussein’s tyranny. This friendship sharpens the narrator’s political awareness and also expands her pan-Islamic perspective away from prejudice. Herein then lies the narrative’s ironic subtext: Muslims do harbour doctrinal and sectarian prejudices against other Muslims, not based on verifiable knowledge but on mere misconceptions.

Specifically, the intra-Muslim contact heightens the narrator’s awareness of the presumed divide in the Muslim consciousness: the Sunni-Shi’i perspectives. In the collection’s most engaging story, “My Friend Narjis,” which is also the collection’s longest story, effectively making it a 35-page novella, the touching narrative foregrounds the evolution of a Sunni-Shi’i marriage relationship. It confirms the warmth of bonding between a devout, but open-minded, Malay engineer and a mild-mannered, erudite Iranian physician, who falls in love with her. The British university setting becomes a suitable site for the encounter: as the protagonist Narjis puts it, “In England, we were on neutral grounds; Sadegh and I had no label to speak of. We were neither Sunni nor Shi’i, just Muslims” (90). Sadegh’s initial marriage proposal is turned down by Narjis’s father on the ground that he is a Shi’i, hence, in his erroneous belief, a “deviationist” (81), thereby echoing a familiar misconception, still harboured by some till now. The story maps the slow painful reversal in the Malay family’s rejection of a marriage that proves later to be quite blissful, except for the wasteful demise of Sadegh in the futile, fratricidal Iran-Iraq war.

The narrative thus represents a bold critique of ignorance-rooted prejudice against the rich heritage of Shi’a contribution to the Islamic civilisational heritage. The book makes an elegant plea for pan-Islamic solidarity, free from denigrating or marginalising other Muslim schools of Ijtihad that are different from the Sunni Mathhab. This assertive pan-Islamic sentiment is poignantly prevalent throughout this engaging narrative. The narrator’s strong Islam-rooted sense of belonging is organically interlinked with her equally vibrant Malay identity, yet the assertive authorial voice is often softened by grace and gentleness, imbued with the ethos of caring and compassion.

To achieve this complex task, the narrative cleverly deploys humour throughout. The author resorts to humorous vignette to convey poignant points. In fact, refined humour blended with warm humanity, represents a hallmark of all of Azhari’s fictional oeuvres. Occasionally, however, the narrative veers into heavy-handed discussion of theological issues; for example, in “The Running People,” she wades digressively into the row over the Muslim foulard in France. This blend of tale and treatise may mildly jar. Happily, Azhari’s penchant for humour, her forte, always saves the moment. The narrator-protagonist can laugh with the others and laugh at herself.

Following a lucid, straightforward design, the author appears keen on recuperating past experiences to construct engaging stories out of them. The stories in this collection are rendered coherent by the passionate authorial voice, the locus of the

university campus, and the prevalent humoristic tone throughout. While the stories contain a range of pathos, the dominant mode is a lively and light-hearted tone that renders the narrative free from cynicism. In fact, it is hard to find a strongly unpleasant character in any of the stories of the collection, except for the looming, sinister figure of Saddam Hussein, referred to variously as “the trickster President” (157), “the perpetrator of [the] senseless Muslimicide” of the Iran-Iraq war (158), or parodically as “President Abu Nawas” (159).

The book is adorned by about a dozen paintings and calligraphical pieces by the talented artist Rosdan Abdul Manan, whose sense of colour and composition is strikingly astute. While the book is tastefully designed, the printing suffers from numerous typos, almost at the regrettable rate of an error per page. This embarrassing shortcoming blemishes an otherwise elegant work.

What we witness in this collection of stories is the vibrant voice of a Malay Shahrazad, articulating herself in Muslimised english. Che Husna Azhari injects the English language with Malay and Muslim (mostly Arabic) expressions, thereby transforming the language while using it. She has developed for herself a style, scant and simple, that is markedly hers in its humour, humanity, and range of pathos. She is prompted by the joy of telling tales that are retrieved, reconstructed, or reinvented for the pleasure of the exercise itself. She enchants, at times preaches and digresses, but always spins engaging yarns, for which the reader feels charmed and edified.

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