

Shanta Acharya, *A World Elsewhere*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2015. 360 pp. ISBN 978-1 4917-4564-5.

Shanta Acharya's *A World Elsewhere* is a beautifully written and often deeply affecting novel. On one level, it is a compelling coming-of-age story set in 1960s and 1970s Orissa in north-East India, as Asha, a self-contained, clever and curious girl struggles to establish her identity while bound in the straitjacket of Hindu tradition and attitudes. Asha is much loved, but, as convention decrees, her parents do not tell her that she is loved, so she grows up feeling lonely and alienated within her family. Furthermore, while she is highly intelligent and is a star pupil and later a star student, she is emotionally illiterate, without the skills to learn what her parents and brothers are thinking and feeling and to understand what life is and how it might be shaped.

Books open up the world to her, providing her with a wealth of knowledge and perspectives, but they serve also to separate her further from the realities and complexities of her own life, providing an alternative imaginary world where she invents her own idea of romantic love – with disastrous consequences. She chooses her own husband on the basis of his letters to her and is immediately plunged into an alien world devoid of kindness, where her husband beats her, humiliates her privately and publicly, and even rapes her repeatedly. Her book-learning is of no help here, nor, more worryingly, is her family who cannot imagine how to help in this situation for which they have had no preparation through precedent. “When the gods wish to punish you, they send you experiences not shared by others” (333).

The marital violence to which she is submitted is recounted in a matter-of-fact way, with neither horror nor hyperbole; Acharya knows that such is the fate of many women even today and chooses to relate key events simply rather than engaging in prurient detail. What interests her is the effect of the violence and rapes: Asha's loss of self, of identity, and even of faith in God. There is no resolution of the marriage problems, only dissolution of the marriage; no salvation in returning to the bosom of her family, only the realisation that, while she is indeed loved, she must leave in order to find selfhood; no redemption for her through her Hindu faith – although as she sets off on her journey to her new world of separation and independence in Oxford she recites in the plane all the mantras that she knows in an attempt to find the sole core of certainty that she has. Faith is restored, is again present, even if seamed through with doubt. The novel ends with hope, albeit a very fragile hope, as Asha looks forward to a future which will bring illumination and transformation. She empties her mind and trusts in what is to come. In many ways, this trusting mind-emptying is the moment when she comes of age.

Yet even in this crucial moment of transition from one world to another, the past is with her, providing metaphors with which to think: “She steadied herself, thinking, *If I can’t make it through one door, I’ll go through another door – or I’ll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present.* She could not remember whose words she was falling back on” (335-36). We may not need to know whose words these are (though it is not insignificant that they were written by the great Bengali poet and political visionary, Rabindranath Tagore), but we cannot fail to recognise that Asha, like all of us, constantly refers back to the past in order to make sense of the world.

A World Elsewhere is undoubtedly a powerful Indian *Bildungsroman*, which charts the lonely struggles of a young Brahmin girl learning to navigate home, family, education, sex and marriage and somehow, finally, finding a future which is hers alone. The focus on traditional Hindu attitudes towards home, family and women is central to the novel, as is Acharya’s acute sense of place, but the novel also addresses concerns that are universal rather than local or regional in nature. An issue permeating the novel is, quite simply, how we learn to live in the world. All of the main characters are isolated in one way or another, unable to express themselves properly or even connect fully to others. Lies, half-truths, gossip, inarticulacy and silence are what passes for communication, and happiness remains eternally elusive: “Even happily married women remain unfulfilled” (324). Existence seems ineluctably to be failure and inadequacy. And yet, and yet... Survival is somehow to be found, first and most importantly, by recognising ‘the eternal presence of the past’ and understanding that we are all shaped by, and connected to, our shared cultural and experiential past, and secondly, by keeping busy and by maintaining hope by talking and laughing together whenever possible.

Acharya’s novel is full of sadness, tragedy and failure, yet it is not a bleak novel. It is a work full of ideas, of colour and even of humour. And in Acharya’s world, be it in Orissa, Oxford or wherever, people do sometimes – eventually – manage to talk and laugh together.

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