

**Shih-Li Kow, *Ripples and Other Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2008. 186pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-23-3.**

“Who needs fiction when a life like hers offers infinitely more variety and interest?” This question is posed in the opening paragraph of the very first tale in this fine collection of short stories by Malaysian writer, Shih-Li Kow. The story then proceeds to introduce “Aunty So and So” who narrates her own autobiography in a lingo which is utterly familiar to the Malaysian reader. And thus, although *Ripples and Other Stories* is indeed a work of fiction, it is written in such a way that the borders between fiction and nonfiction are teased. In the skilful hands of the author, these stories reveal dimensions and facets of our Malaysian context with unerring accuracy.

There are twenty five stories in *Ripples* and they all revolve around the Malaysian experience, vividly evoking different scenarios and experiences which are such a part of our lives to the extent that we rarely think about them but we smile in easy, sometimes wry, recognition when they are brought to our attention. Kow conjures the sights, smells, and sounds of Malaysia in almost every story in her collection. In “Grey Cats,” for instance, the description of a shophouse is so typical of the haphazard huddlings of businesses we find all over the country:

City Medical Centre for Obstetrics and Gynaecology was a four-storey shophouse at the end of a short block. Restoran Hameed, and Hotel Transworld, which rented out rooms by the hour, anchored the other corner. Many an expectant father-to-be doubtlessly awaited the happy arrival of his little one sipping tea at Restoran Hameed, which proudly proclaimed its twenty-four-hour operations with a sign that flashed even in the day.... I walked past a wonderful array of sights and smells, a stall selling fried food under an umbrella, Restoran Hameed’s tandoor oven and banquet spread with a squid *sambal* that caught my eye, a pawn shop, a man-tailor stitching salwar khameez.... If I had to spend my lunchtime in the neighbourhood, I would give that *sambal* a try. (61-62)

There are the pastoral scenes as well which sometimes our sensibilities fail to register, let alone appreciate: “Any eye jaded by the tedium of the greenery could find relief in the sight of an occasional marshland with flowering water lilies, buffaloes cooling in the mudholes of small rice fields, or be surprised by a chance view of a *wakaf* framed by curving coconut trees” (“The Courting of Cik Zahirah” 17).

Thus this collection of short stories takes us to different places and contexts throughout our land, from town to country, residential estates to a rooftop condominium overlooking the Petronas Twin Towers, hawkers selling breakfast along a busy street, a local tourist looking for antiques in an old shop in Malacca. There are also references to crimes which have hogged the media headlines for a while and ethnic issues which still beleaguer social relations. There are just too many examples in these stories to list but they are all representative of Malaysian life and living. But it does not end there. What makes these stories riveting is that they also probe and try to lay bare the human psyche. Most of us can readily understand the feelings of Mrs.

Narayanan who has lived in the same suburb for thirty years, who cannot understand why her new neighbours are not friendly towards her despite her gestures of welcome. She worries when she hears loud crying and shouts from the house next door. Should she call the police or is it just her paranoia? Despite embracing Christianity, she dutifully plucks jasmines every morning but now, instead of placing the bowl of flowers at her Hindu altar, they perfume “the less hallowed air around the telephone” (“Dividing Walls” 41). Then there is the yuppie Michael who is financially well off and does not have to go to his office every day. But the trappings of wealth which surround him fail to give him joy. He decides to put his own stamp onto his opulent abode where he does not feel a sense of belonging because everything in it has been decorated and chosen by an interior designer. Michael frantically goes looking for frangipani plants and when he gets some, courtesy of his girlfriend who places them around his fancy furnishings, all he can do is suppress “the compulsion to run” (“Seeking Frangipani” 76). The rich Michael just wanted to get something for himself, by himself but that was not possible. One suggestion is that sometimes, much as we try, we cannot run away from our constructed roles and selves.

The characters in *Ripples* reflect common, easily definable categories of people but at the same time they display dimensions of being and feeling which are complex and multifaceted. Though each story could and does stand on its own, having its epiphanic moments or points of disclosure and revelation, it is immensely more profitable to read Kow’s stories within a larger context, i.e. making inter-story connections – and this is what separates *Ripples* from some of the other collections in the genre. In the short story, there can only be a limited fleshing-out of the characters due to the particular, and certainly challenging, restrictions of the genre. Usually a short story can hint at or provide flashes of insights into a person. But the people in *Ripples* keep re-appearing and the author uncovers layer upon layer so that motives, aspirations, and actions which seem random in early stories become clearer as we go on reading. Josie’s unnamed mother in “News From Home” who adores her cat to a “point of obsession,” we later learn is Mrs. Narayanan in “Dividing Walls,” an old woman who is house conscious and well meaning but who is extremely lonely and deprived of affection. And so we begin to understand her inordinate love for her cat and her uncertainty and inability to act when she hears her neighbours crying and shouting in the wee hours of the night.

That is why when reading these stories it is imperative that we read them in order of appearance because then we can delight in making connections between the different people, explore their actions and motives and be aware of the interplay of locations. Though the stories are varied in content, they all take place within a circumscribed yet constantly changing space – the space of Malaysia. In this Kow could be described as a “local colourist” – a term used for short story writers who create an image and identity for a place in which they live by setting many of their stories in that one place. Examples of this would be Kate Chopin who wrote about French communities living in the far South and James Joyce and his intriguing Irish personalities living in a tumultuous motherland. What emerges in *Ripples* are people who, though different in ethnicity, are brought together through circumstances of history and are obliged to live out their lives in close proximity.

This is what perhaps makes *Ripples* particularly important to scholars and students of Malaysian literature in English. The themes and structure in the collection emphasise the issues of history, identity (both individual and communal), ethnicity, and place. A multicultural world emerges in Kow's stories. In "One Thing at a Time," "Aunty So and So" talks about her Indian husband who speaks Hokkien. Then there is the husband and wife who belong to different religions, trying hard to reconcile their individual approaches and ways as they bring up their children. "Private Tuition," a serious take on the issue of ethnic division, shows how the riots of 1969 continue to haunt the older generation. The story asserts that the younger people should pay heed and learn from this dark point in local history.

Sometimes the misunderstandings between the different races are treated in a humorous vein. This happens in "Deep Fried Devils." Hawkers of different ethnic origin complain about how inappropriate it is for one race to sell food normally associated with another. Rahimah tells her husband, "That coffee shop there sells *nasi lemak panas* just like they make curry satay.... All that is ours. What about *sambal belacan* and *kerabu*, isn't that our mothers' inheritance?" (53). A little bit away, Lan Jie rants to her customer, "What else will we be forced to give up? Already Malays are selling soy bean milk, *tau foo fah*, *yong tau foo*, *char kuay teow* even *longan* herbal drink. What next?" (51). Kow uses food, one of Malaysia's national obsessions, to show how ridiculous categorising and stereotyping can be. When Rahimah and Lan Jie discover to their horror that some foreigners have set up a stall close to them, they rally together: "We must protect our Malaysian business" (57).

Perhaps the one story which sums up all the different themes and ideas in *Ripples* is "Hungry in Guangzhou" which has the protagonist (a Chinese woman) making a business trip to China. She cannot comprehend why everything seems to intimidate her. The author details the character's shifting emotions in an eatery, as she orders her food: "Here, where my surname was sown, I am an imposter" (59). On her return to Malaysia, she rushes to an Indian Muslim restaurant for a night meal: "*Cham peng*, I say. Two little Chinese words and the man who does not look like me knows exactly what I want.... I laugh with relief, knowing that here I am home" (60).

To summarise, what *Ripples* says, and says well, is that we Malaysians are a complex group of people and that our lives are inextricably linked because of the processes of history and the fact that we all now call this place, Malaysia, home.

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