

**Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *Twenty-Two: New Asian Short Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2016. 282 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-52-3.**

Asia. The length and breadth of this huge continent contains so many countries within it that we can hardly describe it in one word without adding prefixes like East, West, South, Southeast, Central to it. To select specific and representative stories from this region is a really difficult task. The editor of this volume undertook a Herculean effort by inviting writers, both old and new, from different Asian countries to submit short stories not exceeding 6000 words. The response was mind boggling. Almost all the stories came from homegrown Asian writers (though some of them have moved from the country of their origin to either another country within Asia or to the West) and this is how the tally in the anthology stands country wise – one each from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal and Pakistan; four from the Philippines, five from Singapore and eight from India. Lots of countries like China, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos in the East or the United Arab Emirates in the West are not represented at all. Therefore, at best we can say that the book represents an Asia where English is widely used in daily life and has become an accepted creative medium. The stories also reveal how the use of English in these eight countries have moved far away from the standard Queen’s English.

Coming to the stories, given the vast geographical area, rich history and cultural diversity and especially economic transformation that Asia is currently experiencing, it is very important to see how the present situation gets converted into literary products and how the imagination of the creative writer gets reflected in their writing. Speaking of unity and diversity, of the twenty-two stories, one common aspect running through the stories in this volume is their tendency to realism, i.e. portraying life as it is, with considerable fidelity, and highlighting the ordinary experiences reflective of everyday life. Leaving aside fantasy or supernaturalism, the stories are “mostly slices of middle class life narrated in a simple, direct and unadorned language, with the occasional smattering of local words to add to the realism, or even a healthy mixture of localised English in the narrative... which makes the story much more plausible, pleasurable and authentic” (vii).

In the Introduction the editor has mentioned and analysed some of the major themes running through the stories. According to him, the most important of these themes are humour, religion and women’s issues. But it is interesting to see how these themes are reiterated as well as diversified in contributions from each country. Let us begin with the sole entry from Bangladesh. Razia Sultana Khan’s story “The Mollah’s Revenge” is a delicately crafted story that highlights the patriarchal abuse of Islam in the hands of a

pseudo-religious village cleric in Bangladesh. The Mollah is apparently well-versed in the Islamic religion and commands considerable authority in the village, but he uses all his social power to gratify his senses. In a somewhat different tone, the sole entry from Pakistan also has a predominantly religious theme where Muhammad Nasrullah Khan in his story “In Search of God” presents a simple character, Dewaia, who is constantly in search of God, but who is expelled by his villagers for his unorthodox ways.

The sole entry from Nepal is a story called “Bishnumati Blues” by Barun Bajracharya. It is about poverty in Nepal as experienced by a young boy who has to literally fish around for food in the trash bins and garbage heaps in Kathmandu. But his life is not all sorrow as he befriends a destitute orphan girl whose companionship and affection provides him succour in life. On the other hand, the entry from Hong Kong is by Stephanie Han who in “My Friend Faith, 1977” focuses on religious issues and shows us how sometimes pastors must first cleanse their inner selves before spreading the word of God to others. This story centres on an American family of Christian missionaries in Korea that follows the religion strictly in every aspect of their lives. Angela Jessie Michael’s “The Walking Woman” is the only story contributed from Malaysia and it tells us about ordinary women and how they are faring in life.

Out of the four stories from Philippines, Cherrie Sing’s “Ghost Dreams” dramatises the tension that arises when members of the same family subscribe to different religions, in this case Buddhism by the parents and Christianity by their daughter, whose time at a missionary school led to her conversion. Glenn Diaz, in the story “Detour” depicts a young man who gains a new insight into himself as he travels to his office through the streets of Manila on the night of an attempted coup to overthrow the sitting President of the country. Apart from the political environment, it also exposes the mental working of the protagonist who in the end decides not to report for work. “Must Love Dog” by Migs Bravo-Dutt is a fable that explains the human condition through the life of a dog. Written in a humorous vein, the story delights the reader. Priscilla S. Macansantos in “Unnecessary Fictions” depicts campus life and campus politics in the Philippines and reveals how academic staff at tertiary institutions behave and interact with one another, apart from carrying out their teaching and research.

Singapore might be a small country but all its five contributions are rich and interesting as stories. It also proves that writing in English is very popular there. In “Mango” by Damon Chua, Anne Marie Foo is the strong and independent woman who likes to think about things that matter to her and not merely conform to societal expectations, while her cousin Yvette is a socialite who goes with the flow without ever questioning anything. Jessica Tan in “Dragon Girl” depicts two categories of women – strong and self-willed versus silent and submissive. Kelly Kaur’s “Just a Wife” is a poignant story about a

young woman, Sulin, who is devastated by her husband's sexual betrayal, but being emotionally weak, all she can do is brood about it. The narrator in "The Girl and the Snake" by O Thiam Chin has lived all her life with sexual betrayal by her husband and learns just before his death that he had a second family, including a daughter by his second wife/mistress. She responds to the news, as she had in the past, with silence. The last Singaporean story is Yeo Wei Wei's "The National Bird of Singapore." It is about Singapore's *kiasuism* and its impact on the life of an innocent and caring relief schoolteacher. Written in the form of a series of diary entries, the story powerfully exposes the underbelly of the Singapore education system and the ugly side of its overcompetitive culture.

Last but not least are the eight diverse stories that have been contributed by writers from India, some of whom stay within the country whereas others now belong to the diaspora. Barnali Saha, Damyanti Biswas, Lavanya Shanbhogue Arvind, Mahendra Waghela, Nandini C. Sen, R.K. Biswas, Srimati Mukherjee and Uma Jayaraman comprise the Indian authors brigade. Each story in this group is different in theme and structure to such an extent that the genre of the short story itself is open to unlimited definitions. Barnali Saha sets part of her story "Hidden Riches" in Varanasi and talks about Hindu practices and lifestyle when the story's protagonist goes to the holy city in search of a sadhu. In "The Makeup Man" Damyanti Biswas tells us three different stories by breaking up the chronology through artful insertions of flashbacks. "The Idiot's Guide to the Indian Arranged Marriage" by Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind is a spritely satire on how marriages are arranged between families in the subcontinent and the patriarchal values that are inherent in the practice. Mahendra Waghela builds his story "The Sisters" around two siblings Sikha and Roma who are equally intelligent and proud but by certain turn of events the older sister wins the day by getting the handsome young narrator in her embrace. In "Bonti" Nandini C. Sen uses the flashback method and narrates the story through an adolescent point of view. In this story Nabonita is caught off guard when an uncle whom she admires as an elderly role model starts raping her on a regular basis. How she gradually builds up her courage and avenges her humiliation by threatening to kill the uncle with a family "bonti," or the kitchen knife, and daringly walks out of the uncle's house forms the rest of the engrossing story. R.K. Biswas's "Mail for Dadubhai" is written in an epistolary style with exchanges of letters between an elderly grandfather in Kolkata and his grandson in New Jersey and the humour lies in the way the duo use English in their variety. An adolescent point of view is used by Srimati Mukherjee in the story "Light is Something Which is Golden in Colour" when Parboti, the protagonist, shows considerable strength of mind when her first love quietly marries another girl for material gain. She feels hurt, betrayed and somewhat lost but never gives up hope and remains optimistic about her future. The last entry from India is Uma Jayaraman's story "Hilltop." It depicts a timid and

lacklustre woman named Anamika who lives like a mannequin in her own house, ruled completely by her husband Raj, the overarching patriarch of the family.

Technically the short story has grown to encompass a body of work so diverse as to defy easy characterisation. With such a wide variety of themes, images and styles in the stories it is needless to add that this anthology makes a wonderful read for anyone interested in understanding the multifarious kinds of Asiatic cultures. The editor needs to be congratulated once again for bringing out this fascinating volume.

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