

Raudah Yunus and Md. Mahmudul Hasan, eds. *Tales of Mothers: The Greatest Love*. Malaysia: Iman Publications, 2016. 196 pp. 978-983-2423-28-7.

But there's a story behind everything. How a picture got on a wall. How a scar got on your face. Sometimes the stories are simple, and sometimes they are hard and heartbreaking. But behind all your stories is always your mother's story, because hers is where yours begin. (Albom, For One More Day)

Tales of Mothers: The Greatest Love, an anthology comprising eight real life accounts of the trials and tribulations of mothers, successfully captures the very essence of motherhood – the unending chores, the unrecognised labours, the incessant attempts to ensure the overall wellbeing of her children. All her strenuous tasks, her unending labours, appear vindicated when she succeeds in her self-assigned mission of shaping and securing a well-defined and secure future for her child/children, and moulds him/her/them into successful adults infused with exemplary human values.

Yet, more often than not, the incessant labours of mothers all over the world go unrecognised and unnoticed. As Raudah Mohd Yunus points out in her introductory note “The Greatest Love”:

Mothing has perhaps become the toughest job on earth nowadays, considering the dilemma of working women and the pressure of modern life. Mothers are constantly judged; her contributions at home are usually ‘invisible’ while a single blunder will make a news headline in no time. Those who venture into the job market are usually obliged to fulfil the expectations of two opposing fronts: employers at workplace who are often unhappy about their divided attention, and family members who get upset if they are not ‘motherly’ enough. (20)

Kaseh Aini’s reminiscences, titled “Come What May, I’m A Proud Mother,” chronicles her struggle to support her four children without much help from her husband, a largely absentee father, who ultimately left his wife and children for a younger woman. Yet, in spite of the multiple hurdles which came her way, Aini never gave in to fears of despondency and failure, and managed to carve out a successful future for herself, as well as her children: “... I taught them to always ‘pick yourself up and try harder.’ After all, all the great people in this world had multiple failures in life before they eventually reached the top” (32). Nusrat’s story, “The Journey I Travel Alone,” showcases her uphill and unrelenting struggles in order to procure proper medical care for her two very special children. Her first child Sunan was autistic. Her second child Awan was afflicted with several complicated medical conditions right from birth. Nusrat struggled to

care for children, both whose conditions required constant and dedicated attention; while her husband was often away, trying to earn enough to provide proper medical care for the children. It is indeed remarkable that in this day and age, when self-centeredness and narcissism have almost become a creed which is celebrated all around with great gusto, these mothers are completely selfless in their love for their children. Their entire lives have been dedicated towards ensuring a better life for their children; they have never had the leisure to enjoy even the minor pleasures of life, that a large section of us take for granted; yet they have no complaints against the blows that fate has dealt them. Nusrat's poignant musings throw a strong light on the very core of her dedicated love for her two children:

No words can accurately describe my experiences with Sunan and Awan, and no tears can reflect the extent of sadness I suffered, as well as the love I have for my children. This expedition has been full of uncertainty, worry, fear, confusion, anger, disappointment and tears. But it has also taught me love, compassion, hope, faith, joy and strength. God is my witness, that I have given my very best to my children. (57)

"Mom in a Distant Land," written by Putri Afzan Maria Zulkifli, comprises "Love 3" of *Tales of Mothers* – instead of "chapter" each tale is numbered as "Love": "Love 1," "Love 2," "Love 3" and so on. This is as appropriate as it is interesting, for each chapter chronicles labours of love – the selfless, untiring, unrelenting love that is the force that drives these remarkable mothers. Zulkifli chronicles her struggles in the United Kingdom while balancing her studies along with the laborious task of giving birth to, and bringing up, her three children. A staunch believer in God and His benevolent ways, she repeatedly reiterates that: "Obstacles are bound to happen, regardless of how 'perfect' you try to make your life. 'Life' means you have to be independent and able to organize yourself well, without disregarding others" (60-61). Adlina Mustafa Kamal's experiences of the hurdles faced while trying to adopt an ailing orphan form the kernel of her account "A Gift from God." Although she was a qualified medical practitioner employed in a reputable medical institution, questions were inevitably raised as to whether it was appropriate behaviour on the part of a single woman to want to adopt a child: "Being single, the question of *why do you adopt* was everyone's favorite and the assumption of me not wanting to get married was the worst of it. ... It never occurred to me that it would be so hard to face the world when the only thing I wanted was to care for an orphan" (93). It was only after a painstakingly long legal process that Adlina Mustafa Kamal was finally allowed to legally adopt the homeless infant who had captured her heart.

Sarah Ibraheem's heartrending struggles as a single mother trying to raise her three sons without any support from any quarter are recorded in her narrative

“The Promise of Spring.” An unfaithful husband, an unwanted divorce, the sole responsibility of looking after three young children – all of these were thrust upon her, yet she refused to buckle under pressure. She fought bravely against all the adversities that fate thrust upon her, and emerged a winner. Faezah Rokhani’s struggles to study, and then hold on to a job while caring for two toddlers, makes “Holding On” a poignant read. In spite of seemingly insurmountable hurdles, Rokhani managed to complete her studies in a foreign land, and then held on to her job while caring for her two children. All along, her young daughter required her full attention as she suffered from a number of complicated diseases. Rokhani’s tremendous perseverance and dedication towards her children helped her to emerge a winner amidst adverse circumstances. Mardhiyyah Sahri recounts the trauma of losing one of her twins shortly after birth and having to live with the tragedy of the other, Ayyash, being afflicted with cerebral palsy. Although she is the mother of two other children, daughter Humaira and son Fudhayl, it is Ayyash who appears to be the child of her heart. Zaahirah Mohammad’s choice to be a stay-at-home mom, in spite of being qualified to work outside, would seem a strange one too many, but, as Zaahirah reiterates, she herself has never regretted her choice: “Despite all, I never regret my decisions. God has blessed me with the privilege to watch my children grow and spend every moment with them, something I will never trade with anything else in the world” (150).

Tales of Mothers: The Greatest Love is a unique compilation of the tales of extraordinary women who have struggled against adversities to ensure a bright future for their children. Sacrificing their careers, their leisure – sacrificing every wish or ambition which they had once held dear to their hearts – they live only for their children. In their children’s wellbeing, they find all their prayers answered. As Md. Mahmudul Hasan points out in the “Conclusion”: “... beyond the feminist rhetoric and the public-private binary, it cannot be denied that children’s interests in a domestic setting are of paramount importance” (163). Although some of the anthologised stories lack the brilliance or the perfect finish of the texts written by established litterateurs or well-known scholars, the heartfelt, raw emotions that constitute the kernel of these accounts more than satisfactorily make up for any such perceived deficiency.

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