

Vijay Prakash Singh, *A Day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar and Other Stories*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2014. 104 pp. ISBN 978-93-5045-089-5.

In the opening story, impressive enough to have lent its title to this riveting debut collection as a whole, a guide ruminates over his habitual disconnect with changing times and tastes. Singh's choice of protagonist is clever, even as he draws upon a fairly substantial body of Indian writing about the visually anomalous and otherwise fraught relationship between India's past and its millennial present. Singh is masterly in his evocation of the quiet melancholy pervading historical ruins and the consequent existential quandary which professional tourist guides at such sites are forced into. The guide inhabits a liminal space and time, between a ruined and obscure past awaiting revelation through his messianic mediation and the various stages of interest, ranging from the passingly kitschy to the casually detached, he confronts in tourists. It is as though the guide's attachment to his subject has turned him into an embarrassing curiosity. The quotidian nature of Ghulam Sarwar's reflections is succinctly captured in the use of the simple present, while the occasional smattering of decorous Urdu underlines its clash with the epic grandeur of the past. The economic angle to Sarwar's tragic superfluity comes alive in the poignantly delineated reality of a yet unmarried daughter.

If history gives meaning to Sarwar's drab, dejected present, then history in "Curfew" is a cauldron of traumatic memories. Fatalism and the tragic repetitiveness blighting post-Partition communal relations in the subcontinent looms large over the central figure of the ageing mother. Reduced to helpless terror as her son gets dangerously embroiled in the carnage of riots occasioned by the Babri Masjid demolition, she is central to Singh's feeling correction of the gender gap in the historiography of war and conflict.

"The Mango Orchard" grapples with another sort of encounter with the past. It deploys the returning native's yearning gaze to cast light on the disjunction between two chronotopes, as it were – the sleepy small town of yesteryear with its near-pastoral harmony and the happening city to which the native retreats when the rude shock of unregulated real estate promoting quickly cures him of his hitherto carefully preserved nostalgia.

Apart from their unobtrusive telling, so apt for the art of the short story, these intelligent vignettes of towns, i.e. semi-urban India should interest today's cultural historian. As our author-academic is likely to have noted, his stories mark a timely shift of gaze in Indian writing in English away from the hegemonic metropolis. *Masaan* and the about to be released *Death in the Gunj* are noteworthy examples of such metro-to-town crossovers in recent off-mainstream cinema.

What is palpable in these tales is a sense that tragedies, grand or humble, unfold at the cusp of time's ineluctability and the futile resistance individuals lamely put up against it. Singh's occasional recourse to irony, such as in the finely phrased "posthumous target of patriarchal condemnation," brings out his appropriately non-committal, empathetic onlooker's posture.

Residues of late Mughal culture, which may be singled out as one of the leitmotifs of this collection, take on a literally spectral presence in the *Hungry-Stones*-like ghost story, *The House of Sufiya Begum*. Ensconced, a trifle too derivatively though, within a now resurgent genre of postcolonial ghost narratives in literature and on celluloid, it is in sync with the recent spate of interest in the ways in which the Raj Enlightenment had displaced earlier political and cultural dispensations onto the unresolved realm of the supernatural. Underlying this story as the others is an implied synonymity between the notion of the never quite erasable spirit of the bygone and the lingering plight of women. A later story, oxymoronically named "Lawaris Begum" after its eponymous madwoman protagonist, will return to that refrain. Probably the briefest of the tales in this collection, "Lawaris Begum" best exemplifies the dualism informing Singh's worldview. It is simultaneously Foucauldian in its framing of romantic madness and relentlessly grounded in its analysis of the madness-inducing injustices of our times. In the last number in the collection, the pathos of forgotten pre-colonial refinements overcomes the author to the extent that he abandons fictional anonymity for a more direct relaying of tales heard.

Often Singh's focus is on the just about displaced, the less told, the nearly forgotten. There is a conscious raking of not only the nation's pasts, but also that of its literary representations; and it is founded on the conviction that older ways of telling remain as immanent in denial as history itself.

The first person-narrative, clearly deployed for a more introspective feel to the stories, continues into "Flight" and "Life in the Metro." The former is in the voice of a child vendor whose rare moment of stolen happiness proves all too short-lived, while the latter makes an expert transition to a different ontology: an apartment-dweller's ethical struggles with the ecological apathy of the big city.

A progressively unsparing strain of naturalism hits the reader as she passes from these to the next story, "Rain," in which the compulsions behind the phenomenon of migrant labour are shown in all their sinister predatoriness. The same cruelty will lash out at the reader in "Dawn," another tale of migrant woes.

As the stories crisscross the country, from Bundelkhand and Lucknow and Rajasthan to Hyderabad and even Kashmir, we realise that the pan-national canvas is intended. It is Singh's way of orchestrating accidentally meaningful, life-affirming intersections between the multiple regional realities of the subcontinent. "A Shawl for My Daughter" and "Baori the Crazy One" are cases in point. The author's keen sense of the social and ethical responsibilities of a fiction-writer clearly works overtime in ensuring that such encounter between

those privileged and those not so leave the former more decisively benefited. The result can sometimes get a trifle contrived and sentimental, as in “Shireen.” The realist underpinning of Singh’s fictional imagination makes sure, however, that no easy redemption arrives for those labouring under hunger and want, only transitory flickers of relief and expectation.

One can see a certain rationale in the deliberate lack of internal ordering in the collection: variegation. Thematic and tonal clustering is left to the reader, and that is welcome in today’s schema of writer-reader engagement. A rare typographical error and a missing verb here and there (“though the generations”) apart, Writers Workshops publications are always a visual treat for those who mind the material aesthetics of books. One cannot help note the fortuitous conjunction between the charmingly old world feel of Singh’s style and content and the gild-calligraphed, cloth-bound texturing of the book.

Let me conclude with a forecast as muted as the book itself: this is not the last we have heard of Vijay Prakash Singh.

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