Jinat Rehana Begum, *First Fires*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015. 189 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-5061-3.

First Fires opens with a moving quotation from Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

> … but I am bound
> Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
> Do scald like molten lead. (120)

Thus begins our introduction to a family too proud to shed their tears, preferring instead to turn the scalding molten lead into a scalding piece of armoury with which to attack and parry, but too frightened to step away from the fire that binds them together.

The novel presents a family of four dealing with the sudden disappearance of youngest sister, Sal. The confessional style creates an immediate intimacy between the reader and the family, who appear to lay bare their insecurities and vulnerabilities, except Sal, who directs almost all of her internal monologue to her deceased father, the authority figure who continues to haunt the family.

First Fires delves into the emotional landscape of its broken, scarred and unreliable narrators, preferring to present a beautiful lyricism to the most complex of feelings, instead of trying to romanticise the Singapore landscape; this is a novel that presents a lived Singapore, not an embellished tourist hub. The immaculate island-city makes an appearance in the most cursory of ways, allowing Singapore residents a nod of recognition, and foreign readers to experience the less commercialised Singapore:

> Like Ming, I wonder why the Indonesians burn and burn. Deep in the jungles of Indonesia, thousands of forests are burning, the heat seeping into the skins of the people, simmering within them. I imagine the blazing rage in the country and feel almost glad to be amongst such concrete sterility.
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> Here, I sense only muted resentment. The frustrated grumblings of children whose teachers replace PE with more Maths, Science, English, the surly stomping of pavement pounders whose feet crave contact with concrete, and worst of all, the red hives and eyes, the hostile tears, the wheezes and sneezes of those whose throats sting from the acrid fog and whose inflamed noses itch unrelentingly. (*First Fires* 110)

Begum's graceful acknowledgement of life in Singapore, and her elegant resistance to a more stereotypical presentation of such a life, lends *First Fires* the legitimacy it needs to stand as an English-language novel alone, without the cumbersome multi-hyphenated identities that are usually heaped onto a Singaporean novel. The common tropes in Singapore literature – relentless

competition, overwhelming isolation and futile resistance – are all present in this novel, but made instantly accessible to any reader who understands the burden of modern cosmopolitan urbanity:

> You took me out to the park, lit the candle in the dragon and let me loose in a sea of glowing lanterns. I didn't know the other children in the park. They stared resentfully at my lantern and didn't speak to me. They stuck their tongues out at me and whispered dark things to their parents in Hokkien. Turning their heads slightly, the adults looked unhappily at my dragon and urged the children away. (*First Fires* 19)

Indeed, Begum's Singapore is one that is instantly recognisable to many Singaporeans, from the "mutual desire to escape one another, [moving] as one through the ticket barriers, up the escalators, onto the crowded platform and into the approaching trains" (175) to the fear that "living out a life ordered with so much precision will make me numb again" (182).

Perhaps it is because of its appeal to a wider experience beyond Singapore that Begum's debut novel presents a problematic read to unprepared readers, and may be a victim of its own success; *The Straits Times* reviewer felt compelled to describe the family only as "middle-class [and] Muslim," while writer Pooja Makhijani seems to be drawn to it because of the giddy promise of a premiere English novel by a "female Indian Muslim Singaporean" novelist. It appears that readers and reviewers alike struggle with positionality in the novel, and Begum's modernist prose does little to help some readers – so used to simple categorisation and identification in Singapore novels – to recognise not only her characters but themselves in efforts to access the literary space of the novel.

This problem appears to stem from the language; curiously, both *The Straits Times* and Makhijani describe the novel's prose as "lush and evocative," while student Lily Piao was more genuine in her engagement, preferring to appreciate the novel's poetic lyricism while admitting to its perceived lapses into self-indulgence and heavy-handedness. The novel's confessional intimacy is countered by language that I find too "whitewashed"; the richness of the symbolism and the sheer depth of the novel's diversity is unapologetically packed away in the form of a sterile glossary, isolating readers who are unfamiliar with the multi-layered significance of the family's cultural milieu and denying them the intimacy that the novel seeks to establish.

Sal's family is governed by deep-rooted beliefs that stem not only from their Muslim faith, but also from the deeply patriarchal society that the family represents. The crippling injustice of gender expectations is a familiar narrative, but without more investment in the relevant contexts, readers may be unable to appreciate the depth of such injustice. While Piao sees Sal's mantra (that "difficulties are fires") as a "[prescriptive] guide to dealing with such difficulties," my reading brought me to the references of hellfire and the belief

that any earthly difficulty is both a punishment to be borne, and also a testament of one's *iman*, or strength of faith. In this context, the Lear quote resonates more strongly than ever. Sarah's femininity is touted as her strength, and her salwar kameez symbolises her respected position not only in the family but in the public eye; Sal, on the other hand, runs around in shorts. By denying her female body the invisibility and humility that her family and its patriarchal community demands from her, Sal is relegated as deviant daughter, to burn like her cellophane dragon in a manmade hell, but also to rise from the ashes like the phoenix she so wants to be.

While it could be said that too little has been revealed about such symbolism in the Muslim literary context, Begum's sensitivity to the more taboo issues of gender in the family deserves greater mention.

The invisible but dangerous boundaries between childhood innocence and societal corruption preoccupy Adam's relationships with his sisters; both girls are confronted by the vulnerability expected of them and Adam, as the only son, is expected to be the leader he was born to be. All three fail at navigating their inherited roles, and it is this failure of family that is so often overlooked in Singapore literature. Previous reviews noted their disappointment that the plot here "peters out" but the careful detail with which Begum weaves and unravels the relationships here suggests that the plot charts the family's relationships not to digress from Sal's disappearance but to contextualise the disappearance of family and emotional ties – there are families whose relationships do "peter out" for reasons unnamed and not spoken of.

The source of this disappearance is each character's deep distrust of the other; young Sal feels betrayed by Adam's interest in other girls, Sarah does not trust herself to be vulnerable, and Adam, like his namesake, struggles to live up to expectations that he will inevitably disappoint. Each child is left adrift, charting their own self-destructive path, unmoored evidently by their father's passing. Each confession reveals a delayed self-awareness; Sal finds herself once again betrayed, Sarah's strength drives a wedge between her and her own sons and Adam is confronted by his own perceived failures.

Frustratingly, the novel does not offer Ma as uniting figure. Despite Begum's sensitive prose, Ma comes across as an insecure simpleton with her repeated appeals for affirmation ("you know?," "okay?," "right?") and her insightful – but abruptly short – reflections which are not expanded upon:

> What kind of mother is afraid to look at her son's eyes? I thought maybe it's true, maybe I am a bit mad, but then I checked his eyes again. Such big black pupils, dark and shiny like marble, like the Black Stone, and I knew I wasn't crazy. You see, in those days, before his eyes lightened, Adam's eyes reflected too many truths. (*First Fires* 26)

Begum's beautiful weaving of imagery – moving deftly from the monsoon-filled *longkang* to "a gigantic pot of milky tea" (133) – appears almost like a stream of consciousness but is abruptly interrupted by Ma's painfully awkward insistence on fear and self-doubt. If her children are tethered to the wheel of fiery pride and stubbornness, like *Iblis*, then Ma is tortured by dreams of drowning, scalded by her tears of regret and indecision; her recitation of *Surah Al-Khawtar*, a Qur'anic verse on gratitude and easing doubts, underscores her perpetual insecurity. It is Ma's insecurity that defines her unreliability as a narrator in a novel where Dadi, the great matriarch, is believed to always be "formidable" (13) and "in perfect control" (21); Sarah, the middle child, is "the only one in the family who always knows exactly what she wants and why" (69), and Sal "so brave" (42). Surrounded by such forceful personalities, Ma is presented as the weakest link, always left guessing and profoundly ashamed of her own ambitions:

> We would reach the heights of her success with her but just as a story came to a close, just before the glorious returns that a heroine must surely enjoy, there would be a sudden pause in her laughing plans for a more glamorous life. In the midst of our excitement we would find her, staring at the wall. Staring at the framed verses of the Quran.
>
> Praying. Her smooth forehead wrinkling in tight waves she'd whisper, 'God forgive me… Astaughfirullah.' (*First Fires* 56)

Ma's lingering insecurity, however, is problematised by her small victories; her childlike glee at her husband's "failure" to produce a second son and her recognition of his vulnerable position outside the family structure hint at a hidden awareness but the novel does not invite the reader any closer. In the face of the memory of an overbearing father and a domineering mother-in-law, Ma appears to shrink from them even after their passing. Begum's *Lear* reference is *en pointe*, but Ma comes across as a fourth child, forgotten even here.

Ultimately, *First Fires* is a novel about a broken family, burning in the pride that Singapore is known for, but drowning in insecurities that are often overlooked in our literature. Singapore literature, however we define it, needs greater diversity in its emotional landscape and the perceived awkwardness of some readers in accessing the embers of emotion hidden in the pages of *First Fires* hint at a regrettable inexperience and naïveté in empathising beyond one's own cultural milieu.

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Nurhayati Khan, Belgium
Email: nurhayati.khan@gmail.com