

Mohammad A. Quayum, ed. *Twenty-two New Asian Short Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2016)

When asked in 1898 about the most significant political fact in modern history, the German statesman Otto von Bismarck reportedly said: The fact that North Americans speak English. The manifold American dominance in the post-World War years has consolidated the colonial implantation of English in the former British colonies as well as taken it farther afield. Consequently, its world-wide spread in the wake of the British Empire has persisted within different cultures. It is increasingly used internationally in business, diplomacy, professional publications, the communications industry, the entertainment industry, and so forth, to the point where national exposure to English in societies has seeped into their intimate domains. The Asian scene of English, too, is characterised by profuse and variegated growth in its adaptation, acculturation and nativisation. The unique vitality of English in Asia is evidenced by a substantial body of literature flourishing in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Nepal and Hong Kong. The book under review is an authentic sampler of the current creative attempts in English by the writers of Asian origin.

To be sure, English has uneven spread in Asia, which consists of 48 countries. Statistically speaking, writers from the eight countries in Mohammad A. Quayum's anthology where there is a sustained English writing tradition, constitute only one-sixth of the vast continent: they are apparently a tiny cluster. However, they are fairly representative of the Asian culture in that no language other than English has a pan-Asian presence. Major languages indigenous to Asian countries such as Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay and Bengali have large number of mother-tongue speakers but they are more or less limited to unilingual monoliths in linguistically and culturally pluralistic Asian societies. Although English lacks genetic nativeness in Asia, it has functional nativeness fortified by its status as an official or second language almost throughout the continent. With its prolonged presence the language has shed its distance-marking otherness and acquired a variety of daunting dimensions, including the creative processes at various levels to articulate intimate experience and concerns.

The short stories in Quayum's anthology by Asian writers – one each from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal and Pakistan; four from the Philippines, five from Singapore and eight from India – exemplify supple use of English in depicting slices of Asian society and culture. These stories are not plotty narratives with complex and elaborate sequence of events. They are well-crafted empirical observations wedded to emotionally appropriate modes of human life. The representational exactitude leavened by humour and comedy in R.K. Biswas' story, 'Mail for Dadubhai', Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind's 'The Idiot's Guide to the Indian Arranged Marriage', and Migs Bravo-Dutt's 'Must Love Dog' is unmistakable. 'Male for Dadubhai' is written in an epistolary mode, with exchanges of letters between an elderly grandfather in Kolkata and his grandson in New Jersey. Lavanya Arvind's story is a stimulating and perceptive satire on the mode of settling arranged marriages and the patriarchal values entrenched therein. The panoply of matrimonial negotiations exposes the attendant wily pretensions. 'Must Love Dog' is an amusing fabulation of a dog's life for conveying an oblique moral message. Almost all the stories are traditional narratives except an experimental tweak in the chronological sequence of Damayanti Biswas's 'The Makeup Man'. Damayanti conflates seamlessly and ingeniously the narratives of Kajale, a young, ambitious Mumbai-based journalist, of Govind, a money-grubbing beggar in Mumbai's lucrative location, and of Nitya, a talented actress perilously hooked on Bollywood's meretricious hype and superficial swell.

Book reviews: *Twenty-two New Asian Short Stories* ed. Mohammad A. Quayum. Murari Prasad. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

In their varied portrayals Asian women prominently figure in Jessica Tan's 'Dragon Girl' and Nandini Sen's 'Bonti'. Further, religion as a basic cultural mooring in multi-faith Asian societies animates these narratives. Quite a few stories feature this dominant cultural marker, particularly Muhammad Nasrullah Khan's 'In Search of God', Stephanie Han's 'My Friend Faith, 1977' and Barnali Saha's 'Hidden Riches'. The edifying import of Saha's story is that we all have soul, a part of the imperishable divinity or a piece of Brahman within us, superior to material treasure that the protagonist is seeking to overcome his family's poverty and deprivations. Overwhelmed by materialism, human beings tend to ignore the Ultimate Reality of the universe. Multi-religious strains in miniature are depicted in Cherrie Sing's 'Ghost Dreams' with a message about the basic human values of love and trust in all religions. A variation on this theme is evident in 'In Search of God' which underlines ecumenical faith across diverse religious communities. A simple and unorthodox character, Dewaia, looks beyond the horizons of his fellow Muslims in line with the rich spiritual tradition in the subcontinent. Religious abuse by a polygamous and lascivious Muslim cleric is portrayed in Razia Sultana Khan's 'The Mollah's Revenge'. This finely nuanced tale of an upright, innocent but defiant Muslim woman, Izam, engages an extremely tendentious and palpably moving issue in Islam and highlights a small-minded, blinkered approach to the humane teachings of a gentle religion. Spurious religiosity, externalities of belief and sanctimonious pretensions of an American family of Christian missionaries in Korea are depicted in Stephanie Han's 'My Friend Faith, 1977'.

Sufficiently varied circumstances, types and temperaments of women from diverse social backgrounds reflect the melange of Asian culture and society in these stories, for example Angela Jessie Michael's 'The Walking Women', Daman Chua's 'Mango', Jessica Tan's 'Dragon Girl', Kelly Kaur's 'Just a Wife', Mahendra Waghela's 'The Sisters', O Thiam Chin's 'The Girl and the Snake', Srimati Mukherjee's 'Light is Something Which is Golden in Colour', and Uma Jayraman's 'Hilltop'. In several of these stories, helpless submission of women to the entrenched patriarchal dominance is depicted. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Marriage-crazy Old Men' is also informed by this concern for the commodification of young girls. These variously suppressed women are unable to forge their own future in that they are not yet free from the trammels of hidebound patriarchy. Some, in contrast, are strong and fairly feisty. They defy the restrictions of gender and traditional inequities with pluck and call on all their courage to face the ordeals with stubborn persistence. Nandini C. Sen's 'Bonti' tells the tale of Jochan and his daughter, Nabobita. Jochan is not a man of means but he dreams big for his daughter's education. His colleagues are amused. His factory boss in Asansol feels insulted because his children studied in the same school where Nabonita has been placed. Even Jochan's wife, Maya, is uneasy with her daughter's liberated grooming and finds her 'wayward' and difficult to deal with. Eventually Nabonita's dreams are shattered when she is sexually abused by her uncle, Maya's affluent Calcutta-based brother-in-law, masquerading as a generous and kind caregiver. The crestfallen girl slashes her uncle's neck with 'bonti', a kitchen knife, and drifts away in a brutalised and cynical state.

The stories in this collection have distinct thematic flavour and stylistic elan. Barun Bajracharya's portrayal of an indigent Nepali young boy in 'Bishnumati Blues' is engaging. Campus life figures in 'Unnecessary Fictions' as well as in Priscilla Macansantos' story, set in the Philippines, and in Yeo Wei Wei's 'The National Bird of Singapore'. In the latter, the grasping syndrome of *kiasu* or highly competitive Singaporeans interwoven with the unpleasant elements of the country's education system is skilfully evoked. 'Detour' by Glenn Diaz deals with political shenanigans in the Philippines. A multi-coloured sliver of Asian culture is offered in these stories. Their plot lines are causal and chronological, rather than strikingly experimental.

2

This collection of short stories is a sequel to Quayum's earlier anthology, *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (2010). In this offering, he has rounded up many fresh contributors, adding to the quality and variety of Asian writing in English. These narratives are a valuable resource for studying transplanted varieties and diffusion of English in various degrees, in addition to revealing literary perspectives on Asian society and culture. Taken together, the two anthologies call for a conceptualisation of the dimensions of Asia's English. They may well become a prelude to an Asian canon of the language.

Murari Prasad