Adnan Mahmutovic, *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* (Salt Publishing, 2012)

How to Fare Well and Stay Fair is Adnan Mahmutovic’s most recent short-story collection, revealing the trials and tribulations of refugees in a migrant country – the physical and psychological impact of war, the disorientation and the discomfort of self in an unfamiliar culture and country leading to displacement, internal exile, fragmentation and loss of identity, difficulties of communication, relationships, and no sense of belongingness to anywhere. The notion of home is reduced merely to ‘imaginary homelands’, a phrase created by the novelist Salman Rushdie.

The cataclysmic consequences generated by the war that broke out across Bosnia had a profound impact on the psyche of its people. In Bosnia, to create a pure ‘Serbian’ nation, the leaders adopted the harsh calculative method of ‘ethnic cleansing’ by killing and torturing thousands of people and throwing them from their own homeland. Thousands of women were raped as a military tactic to cripple a particular section of population – compelling them to leave their country.

The book exemplifies the struggle and survival of people who are forced into exile to a foreign country and ultimately unable to find a ground to settle because of their lifetime tag as ‘outsiders’ in an entirely alien land as well as their own homeland – creating the complex issue of identity and home. The unsettled mind that is produced due to fluctuating like a pendulum between two world ‘values’ gives space to a fragmented mind and identity which is vividly illustrated in the book through several characters who are the victims of war-driven situation.

Though each story has its own tale to tell, the way it is intertwined with the other stories describes the long saga of refugee’s agony – sharing the common strand of displacement and alienation. The fictionalised chapters featuring female protagonists are interwoven with writer’s own point of view on the complex world he is presently living in. Structurally too, stories are amalgamated with unusual ‘linking pieces’ – dictionary entries, letters and web chat that give a very inimitable texture to the book. In a recent interview, Mahmutovic says

I put them together and also wrote some flashes and poems that both created links and breaks between the ‘main’ stories. I wanted to introduce discontinuity between stories that naturally fit each other, and linking pieces between stories that did not. For me this book is more of a novella than a collection, or some hybrid form.¹

Almasa, the main protagonist of the book, migrated to Sweden, despondently leaving her family and her country. In ‘[Refuge]e’, the war leaves her so numb and muddled, that the significance of home is reduced to a question mark, ‘Ho?me’. In ‘Myth of the Smell’, there is no feeling of nostalgia for the soil of her ‘imaginary’ homeland with the ugly truth of war that she has confronted. She looks at the ‘insouciant clouds’ having ‘no boundaries to cross, their home a place so desolate it mocked destinations’ (16). On the contrary, she is a lost soul having boundaries to cross.

Though being repeatedly tortured and raped, she manages to survive the distorted world in her own way – every time standing straight to take charge of her broken life. The writer describes the brutality towards women as they were reduced merely to ‘sexual organ’ during the war, ‘I told you to shut your mouth up, not your cunt! Open it, it’s dry! I don’t fucking like it dry’ (18) and were forced to accept their fate in a new-adopted foreign land.

She hopes never to encounter ‘a countryman, or woman’ but when she sees a Bosnian old woman – who like her homeland is ‘mystical and mythical, both native and strange’, Almasa ‘feels like running to her and hugging her’ (44). This approach-avoidance conflict describes her unsettled yearnings for her own homeland.

Another female character, Fatima, an illegal immigrant, gets driven into prostitution in the new land. She has been robbed of even her hopes and dreams due to uncertainty in life. She ‘just hate being in them [fantasies], I can’t do it or I’ll end up in a lunatic asylum’ (73).

Unable to relate to the adopted ‘values’ and yet striving hard to be accepted by their adopted country/new order, longing to go back home and yet unable to relate to ‘native’ values upon return – all the characters find that their exile becomes an integral part of their displaced psyche.

In ‘Gusul’, Emina’s plight as a refugee is sympathetic: ‘as a genderless refugee outside a corroded bus holding the hand of a mute mother’ (79). She describes how her mother became traumatised since they left their homeland. When her mother dies, she has to deal with different system of a foreign land as the Imam says ‘this isn’t Bosnia. We can’t bury her today …’ (83).

They all struggle with the same feeling of alienation – they try to hold themselves in a deep ocean of otherness, at the same time desperately clinging to their native selves.

In ‘Butter’, Adam, another character whose life is determined by uncertainty, wonders whether he should suppress his innermost longings or cry out loud for the freedom: ‘the crack in the ceiling isn’t too bad, but I fear my mother’s singing of Bosnian folk songs will tear it open and expose our amazing family to the cold Swedish sky. That’d be great. Then I’d move out’ (100). However, steadily, he obtains higher education; he works with elderly people; and indeed, he has a family he can come back to after the persistent struggle with his identity.

The writer closes the collection with an essay, ‘Afterword: Homecoming’ – where he goes back to Bosnia only to see how things have changed there. Even people back home consider him an outsider: ‘you feel you’re coming back home and that everything is just hunky-dory. But you don’t get that you’re foreigners now. You’re strangers here.’ The writer realises, ‘Right there and then, my home was, if anything, my strangeness’ (138).

Fluctuating between first-person and third-person narrative as in the last few stories, Mahmutovic’s autobiographical pieces merge with other fictional stories through his empathic insight into situations and people, creating a long united story of abandoned lives.

Adnan Mahmutovic’s How to Fare Well and Stay Fair is an honest book depicting lives that have been forced into exile from their own homeland. The level of uncertainty among his characters in relation to their identities is very touching. There is a ray of hope for his protagonists as they re-erect their crushed identities in the hope of a better tomorrow. It sheds light on the assimilation of ‘other’ culture and country to create a cordial relation with one’s inner self. Accepting reality is the only way to be free from any boundary to stay fair and say farewell.

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