
It seemed nothing short of serendipitous when I surveyed the pile of review books on the editor’s desk the day before I flew via Dubai to visit my daughter in Malta, and found *Transactions* (2013) by Ali Alizadeh, a novel at least partly about a ‘spoilt Emirati girl’, set in airports and transit cities around the world.


*Transactions* fits cross-genre: part thriller, part realist drama, part satire, part diatribe against global capitalism and every other patriarchal ism. It seems that Australian/Iranian academic, poet – shortlisted for the 2013 Prime Minister’s Literary Award for *Ashes in the Air* – and prose writer Ali Alizadeh agrees with Naomi Klein about our contemporary preoccupation with skanky sex, materialism and celebrity, and our failure to face up to the effects of globalisation on humanity and on climate.

Yes, Mum. We really are a global village. A simple village, with only one dusty street flanked by friendly locals and their quaint huts. And our street leads to the hell of exploitation. Lies. Our friendly country folk are inbred vampires. Our pretty cottages, built upon layer upon layer of charred skeletons (148).

Power disparities that form along lines of gender, religion, race and class, and the darker secrets of globalisation, ignite the dramas of the book. Sex as a commodity and tool of oppression lubricates the mix: erotic asphyxiation, voyeurism, double penetration, bondage, rape.

A third person present-tense narrative prefaces the first story in *Transactions*, inviting readers to identify with a girl writing on her laptop at Schiphol airport, a blue aura emanating from her lapis lazuli pendant.

In the first story, the girl, vegan ABC journalist Anthea writes a letter to her mother now deceased. This epistolary narrative reveals how she introduces herself on a same-sex dating website to the CEO of a ‘social empowerment’ company. Her Maoist poet, Afghan mother has been ‘eliminated’ by the CIA and her daughter seeks revenge.

Readers will get to know her work over many stories and by her calculated intelligence. Globally mobile – ‘I probably spend more time on air than on land’ – she is e-connected, cashed up and hyper-reactive (146). The action begins with an extraordinary act of violence that will offer readers who like kick-arse females engaging traction. Further into the narrative, they might find themselves cheering. The slippage between one damaged character and another, one story and the next, all linked by ironic hooks and reversals, carries the dissonances of the plot: strange relationships between neighbours, clients, colleagues, gamers, daughters, and fathers, too. The central motif of the lapis lazuli pendant, with its penetrating Phoenix eyes, works metaphorically as restorative justice, Empress, a new beginning and, ironically, an empty sign (145).

In each story, reasons for the flip from antagonist to protagonist, and victim to perpetrator rapidly become obvious. Deep historical wounds have been inflicted, for the most part by males on females: rape, trafficking and abuse. Apart from Anthea, the cast includes Sumia, spoiled,
anti-Semitic daughter of a Dubai sheik and first-person narrator of three stories, Zhang Lin, successful gamer who takes up a dangerous challenge, Lily, infertile New Zealander, Karina, disaffected university student turned sex worker from the Ukraine, gay writers and actors who are not exempt from cruelty, directors of NGOs and their African clients and an Iranian nuclear scientist. Female characters seize life by the throat but also play with your mind as by turns they elicit your sympathy and abhorrence.

On first reading, and despite the links between them, nailing down the characters’ identities may challenge you. Halfway through the book, while being sprayed for foreign insects, grounded on the plane for an hour on the Larnaca tarmac in Cyprus, I constructed an elaborate graphic organiser to help me separate and link the characters and their narrative strands. The story moves fast. Snappy dialogue imbued with tension kept me turning pages. Eventually the vignettes helped me visualise a vendetta that leaves behind a trail of dead: strangled, drowned, hung, poisoned, raped and driven to suicide. Victims, cowed and repentant go meekly and swiftly to their death. In a different book this might undermine tension. Balancing humour and social commentary, Alizadeh does not allow his cast of zealots to prevaricate and yet, one character draws this distinction: ‘I will not be cruel. I will not enjoy my work’ (146); then in retrospect, ‘I’m feeling uneasy, I’m becoming cruel’ (146). I felt implicated, as a reader and as a global citizen.

He sets up paradoxes between humanity and country, and justice and revenge, to explicate themes of power and exploitation. He uses multiple narrative perspectives, hooks and reversals, to lambast gender, class and race stereotypes. He employs butterfly effects not unlike those used by Mexican film director Alejandro González Iñárritu in *Babel* (2006), suggesting that the world is smaller than it has ever been and that we are all responsible for each other. His characters are globally connected via travel, fast internet, social aspiration and sexual commerce.

We discern thin lines between terrorism, fundamentalism and justice in acts of violence. Perhaps that is Alizadeh’s point. ‘The monstrous fetishes of global Capitalism cannot forever remain hidden under the sanitised mask of a happy harmonious “global village”,’ he commented after the 2008 GFC.1

Dubai airport’s duty-free mall turns over millions of dollars – more than any other airport mall in the world. Ceiling-high signage, a quote from the first Maktoum Shiek, tells the story: ‘What is good for the economy of Dubai is good for the Emiratis.’ You might meet versions of Alizadeh’s Sumia and her father, smoking in the first-class lounge, shopping in the duty-free mall, propping up the bar in designer clothes. Her problems with anger-management and her incendiary attitude to education offer Alizedeh a chance to showcase a savagely comic register. ‘The Fool’, narrated by Sumia, is alive with malapropisms: ‘ignorant Infidels who hate us Arabs. I expositioned the truth about their racistim’; ‘I know advanced English phrases like I can’t be shagged’; ‘There is no Global Warming which is not real. It’s a dirty Jew conspiracy like the Hollowcast’ (217-221). For the most part Alizadeh writes in clean, pointed language with few figurative or poetic flourishes.

Foreshadowing exposes hypocrisy and double-dealing. Latter stories are particularly rich in irony, black humour and heavy satire that could be labelled absurd. ‘You wanna make the shift from porn to mainstream cinema, don’t you?’; ‘By showing my breasts?’ the Ukrainian student turned sex worker/porn-star asks her director (154). Some of the writing is deliberately

1 Susan Hornbeck, Publicity UQP, Media Release, *Transactions* by Ali Alizadeh, UQP Short Fiction Series; An Australian initialism standing for Global Financial Crisis.
clichéd in the service of satire: for instance, a philandering CIA defector describes ‘a stunning Indian research student whose vagina had been nothing short of a wonder’ (114). References to Aussie porn films – *The Golden Fleas, The Great Barrier Grief* – verge on slapstick/schlock. In *Chopped Down Under* … the anti-hero ‘eliminates the Aussie killer by lopping off his head with a boomerang’ (155).

Alizadeh also takes the hatchet to culture, family life and academia. He satirises a global literary award in which, according to a Japanese judge, Billy …’s ‘novel is going to win the Nobel prize’, it being ‘so full of wisdom and compassion and truth. Like a Johnny Cash album’ (192). In some instances, I felt sledgehammered and wished that Alizadeh had trusted me more. Having said that, complexity and the kind of moral conviction you hope good novels will carry counterpoints this. Alizadeh ululates and rages with feminists.

Creating a diverse range of characters enables him to traverse important twenty-first-century anxieties about migration, asylum seeking, child labour, pornography, violence, murder, financial crises, suicide, rape, nuclear accidents, PTSD and human trafficking. References to Medea suggest that under certain circumstances women as well as men will kill their own (177). This message is further cruelled in a theatre production in which an actor, a ‘famous part-Aboriginal former athlete’ with a ‘magnificent cock’ plays Medea as a househusband (165).

‘You should have served humanity. Not just your country,’ says a vengeful phoenix swooping in on her kill, and this seems to be Alizadeh’s metatext (122). The book’s denouement neatly turns the tables and not without irony when Tamil Niromi reveals her true identity. Even as it entertained, *Transactions* filled me with disquiet, validating my worst fears about globalisation.

Gay Lynch