

## Isabelle Li, *A Chinese Affair* (Margaret River Press, 2016)

*A Chinese Affair*, by Isabelle Li, is a collection of short stories about migration divided into four segments, each narrating four tales. Some of the stories are connected through the characters and sentiments, which provides a heightened emotional expression. This connection results in the reader gaining a better understanding of the character's suffering. The yearning for familiarity and homeliness does not need to be discussed each time anew. The subtle connection between characters not only gives a context to the events; it suggests a universality of emotions and experiences. A family death, nostalgia, or homesickness becomes a shared experience.

Nostalgia is also heightened by the use of Chinese aphorisms and phrases in narration, and the absence of these phrases from the characters' lives. In a foreign environment, the characters fail to express themselves, resulting in a solitary remembrance of the past. This failure not only heightens their loneliness but gives hope of a better, satisfactory life for which the characters only need to find a better expression of their sentiments.

The first segment of the book narrates stories connected through the longing for an expression and homesickness in a foreign land. The characters change their names in a desire to fit in in the new country and to have a fresh start. Li signifies this as the cause of the characters' suffering as she says: 'it is important to know the correct names of anything, because language is all we have – words are symbols, and when symbols do not represent reality, they lose meaning, and we lose our ability to think' (33).

In the second segment, Li tells stories set in China. These talk about dual nature of personalities and the need for characters to find a space of their own. They have secrets that they guard with smiles and silences.

The third segment of the book is about love, loss, and land. Li pictures love as an unattainable desire. In these stories, characters compromise love for the sake of their families or even because of their past, which they do not want revealed. Readers not only come to know of the lives of characters in these particular stories but also end up adding to an understanding of the previous ones. Although a melancholic read, the stories are not dark, and end with hope for happiness and contentment for the characters.

Characters in the book suffer acutely from an inability to express themselves in all the stories, but the final segment of the book particularly deals with this issue. Unshared past, unexpressed grief, and unsent messages are the topics of these stories. The characters face misery as a result of their sensitivity and failure to express themselves. In the story 'Two Tongues', the main character fails to convince a famous poet to have his work translated; the poet's argument being that an expression cannot be copied into a second language. Li has presented this as the cause of the characters' grief. The fact that characters cease to use their mother tongue becomes their hamartia. However, their tragedies are not eternal and can be overcome simply by coming to terms with their past.

With two tongues failing them, the characters depend largely on images to express themselves. 'Shadow of Gold', 'Blue Lotus', 'Lyrebird', and 'Narrative of Grief' are especially rich in imagery, and images rather than dialogue convey the deeper meaning.

The stories take sudden sharp turns. The reader is left without a guard, and it is up to the reader to make connections between different sides of the story. A similar relation exists between the stories. Some appear as a different dimension of the life of a character from another

story. This not only creates depth but intimates the connection between the reader and the character. The collection of short stories becomes a cubic representation of a community where each side is given a fair share of expression.

As a collection of migration stories, this collection gives an expression to problems of identity, nationality, language and expression. The world is shown as a global village with people related to each other irrespective of race and nationality. Li shows how people do not let boundaries keep them from a better life; her characters are always ready to take the plunge to escape, live, and explore. Her stories are an insight into Chinese culture and society, with its positive and negative aspects objectively discussed. *A Chinese Affair* is an enjoyable read. It not only takes its readers to multiple countries but also encourages them to think of the world as a boundless place where nationality or race is a matter of diversity, not division.

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