

Book Review on *The Best Asian Short Stories 2017*

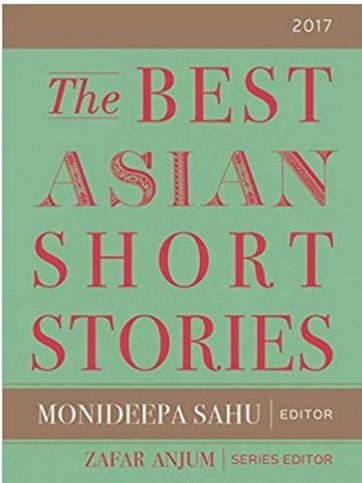
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Author and Critic

Asia is our largest and most populous continent, the site of many of our first civilisations, the birthplace of most of the world's mainstream religions, and home to 4.5 billion people constituting roughly 60% of the world's population. Within that number there is a wide variety of ethnic groups, cultures, environments, historical connections and government systems. Compiling and editing this volume of short stories from such a vast area offering such a wellspring of experience must have been a daunting task and Monideepa Sahu is to be congratulated on fulfilling her commission with such enthusiasm, dedication and professionalism. Credit should also be given to the translators in cases where their services were required.

The idea for the anthology came from Zafar Anjum, founder of Kitaab International. Calls for submissions were posted on the Internet and Kitaab's own site and Monideepa Sahu approached writers whose works she

admired, requesting them to spread the news by word of mouth. Over 300 submissions were received. Sifting through them all took months of meticulous hard work. In some cases the editor worked with the individual authors advising them on areas that could be improved upon and encouraging them to resubmit revised versions of their texts.



The 32 stories that make up this anthology originate from writers resident in eleven Asian countries including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia the Philippines. They are written by novelists, journalists, playwrights, poets, film translators, editors, content developers, engineers, development workers, social activists and film critics. Many of them are keen on collaboration between artistic disciplines, have already published a substantial body of fiction, won prestigious prizes, appeared in journals of international repute and have had their work translated into several languages. What they have to offer is impressive both in terms of quality and content.

Within these pages we meet a locksmith who has spent years perfecting a skeleton lock, a window cleaner and his colleagues working on a high-rise block, immigrants hoping to make it to a safer shore, refugees who have lost

everything, a young boy who is driven to violence because of being bullied at school, a medical student who goes off in search of his stolen mobile phone, a father's quest for a son-in-law and a woman from India who experiences at first hand the beauty of cherry blossom in Japan.

One of the many strengths of these writers lies in their ability to turn a story that focuses on a specific incident into something that becomes universal. In *Ladybugs Fly From The Top*, Park Chan-Soon delivers a first-rate description of a man's fear of falling from a safety board fifty floors up a high-rise building where there's no room for mistakes. 'When yer a beginner, never look down.' Humans, however, are full of mistakes and life itself can be like walking on a tightrope. This story quickly translates into a fear about failure with regard to one's place or status in society. 'To survive you have to come in first at the top.' The tension created by this story is masterful and it is a tension that the writer manages to sustain from the beginning to the end.

Srinjay Chakravarti's *Skeleton Lock* tells the story of a locksmith who has spent years perfecting a skeleton lock, that is, one which any key can open. It is totally superfluous and yet he is so proud of it. This translates very quickly into a philosophical question: does everything need a purpose to exist? Why do I exist? The transition from a human story to a universal one is achieved with great economy.

The way we appear to ourselves and to others is a major theme running through this collection. The young girl in

Shoma Chatterjii's *Chitrangarda* wakes up to find that her 'café mocha burnt sienna complexion' has turned into the colour of peaches and cream. This girl knows all about colour. It turns out that her doctorate is a dissertation on the black goddess Kali. 'Within her blackness is the dazzling brilliance of illumination.' Chitra finds herself facing an identity crisis. Although the theme is about cultural attitudes towards skin colour in India, skin colour being an indicator of identity, ethnicity and status, Chatterjii tells us that it is the person inside and what that person achieves in life that matters, not looks.

Preoccupation with the way people look and interact with each other – especially between the sexes- is a dominant theme in N. Thierry's story, *Soft Boy*, where specific descriptions of clothing become a metaphor for defining one's status at any moment in time. Power dressing and other forms of dressing are used skilfully in this story about a young Singaporean male who is pressurised into projecting a false image of himself in order to conform to social norms. The subject of one's place in society features in Mithran Somasundrum's entertaining story, *The Yakuza Under The Stairs* where the yakuza becomes a status symbol and brings acceptance into the community's elite for a former London cab driver who inherits a large sum of money and goes off in search of a new life in Thailand.

Cultural differences are explored in Geeta Kothari's *The Spaces Between Stars* where the differences between an Indian woman married to an American man are carefully delineated. The woman comes across as being indecisive

whereas her husband is depicted as a confident academic who has achieved a measure of success in life. The woman, whose sense of feeling and compassion for others, is seen in the end to be the more advanced. Food plays a big part in this and other stories where it is used chiefly as a cultural determinant. In Geeta Kothari's story, Maya is horrified by her participation in the death of another creature when she goes fishing. The sunfish metaphor recurs several times throughout the story. She dreads telling her aunt, who is a vegetarian, what has happened. Tired of cultural differences and how they are affecting her life, Maya 'wanted out of this skin, out of this life and into another, one that fit her, not one that she had to fit.'

Loh Guan Liang's *Three For A Dollar* – a piece of flash fiction – also focuses on food, this time it is epok epok (fried Malay pastry):

He never ate what he sold, which was why he never knew how when his customers bit into the fried pastry filling they got reacquainted, like oil surfacing on water, with that which they had lost....His epok epok became part of a morning ritual of recollection and forgiveness. Some ate it for breakfast, others brunch. Some saved it till the end of the day when they were alone. Through some preternatural prudence the epok epok man sagely limited each customer to three pieces. Too much of a good thing, even if it is cheap, is no good.

Food features again in *Ammulu* by Poile Sengupta. In this story, a father asks a marriage merchant "What do young

men want these days from a wife?" Putting in a good word for his daughter, who is running a snacks business in Trichy, he says that one day she may become an international cook. Later he reluctantly concedes that "today's boys only want wives that look like film stars."

In Jeremy Tiang's harrowing story, *1997*, food is seen as a means of survival. An aunt reveals to the young teenage girl in her charge, who does not want to move away from Hong Kong, how terrible things were when she herself left China for Hong Kong. "We avoided the Cultural Revolution by going where we did, but even so, the year we went was the most terrible. No food. Nothing could be worse than no food."

In *Water On A Hot Plate*, Murli Melwani comments that "food is a wonderful destroyer of inhibitions." In this story, Melwani uses both food and language as cultural identifiers. The loss of native language skills among the younger generations living in exile is beautifully portrayed in this story.

Anand and his generation understood the Sindhi language but could not speak it. Teenagers and younger children nowadays neither understood not spoke it. They spoke English, Hindi, Tagalog, Portuguese, whatever, depending on the country where they lived.

This too is viewed in a positive light when Melwani writes "You can't integrate with a society if you don't speak the local language." Melwani sums it up neatly when he writes

“People like Vivek and I saw it all; our culture was like a puddle of water on a hotplate effervescing, vanishing.”

Immigration and the plight of the refugee is another theme that is handled with sensitivity in this collection. In *Samar*, Amir Darwish gives a realistic portrayal of the human tragedy of boatloads of immigrants hoping to make it to a safer shore and the beginning of a new life. Partition refugees who have lost everything, including a piece of their homeland, are the subject of Shashi Deshpande’s *Independence Day* which begins with a heartfelt description of one of the many stages of grief that one human being can experience for the loss of another, but later becomes something more universal when a woman recollects girlhood memories of Partition refugees. Deshpande gives us an emotional picture of children looking for Sindh on a map of the new India, a map that ‘seemed incomplete. As if someone had clipped its wings.’

Siddhartha Gigoo’s *The Umbrella Man* takes place in an asylum. According to Monideepa Sahu, ‘the story indirectly alludes to victims of the persecution of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir, which resulted in a mass exodus of the community from their homeland.’ Here, however, the focus is on one individual, referred to as Number 7, and speaks of how the smallest of things (in this case, an umbrella) can take on the greatest significance when one is in confinement. Gigoo uses rain as a metaphor for freedom:

Somehow, Number 7 was hopeful of the rain that evening as well. He felt lucky to have chanced upon the umbrella with yellow-and-red stripes. It had become his playmate. Like him, the umbrella too, had not seen the battering of rain at all. What good was an umbrella if it had not been used in the rain? The dance of the raindrops on the nylon cloth held together by slender aluminium strips was a distant dream. It was the rain which defined the umbrella, gave it its purpose, its essence and meaning. The umbrella was utterly worthless without the rain.

But then there was the waiting—a long and lacerating wait for the clouds and the rain. On many evenings, Number 7 had seen the swelling clouds waft by and hover over the asylum compound. And without fail, he would excitedly unfurl the umbrella and leave his ward with hope in his heart, thinking of the rain, expecting it to come down.

People who have to face change in some form or another—usually, the change that comes from moving to a completely different country and culture, is one of several key themes to be found throughout these stories. In Jeremy Tiang's 1997, the aunt tells the teenage girl in her charge "I understand, change is frightening. It's difficult to leave familiar things behind. But sometimes, they leave you." Changing tack and, in the case of Shikhandin's *Patchwork*, one's religious convictions, is seen as being just another means of survival for one family who have escaped from one identity into another.

In Chit Mahal's *The Enclave* history is played out through a game of chess as the protagonist hops between borders – in this case the border between India and Bangladesh. Seeing the same sea, sky, mud and water, he ponders the question “how different is our religion from theirs, then?....How different is our life from theirs, then?”

Clara Chow's story, *Girls' House*, hovers between imagination and reality as a girl imagines the lives of her grandparents and later finds out some shocking truths. Imagination is sometimes kinder than reality:

Life is not neat. It goes wherever it wants to go, dragging you with it, like the owner on the other end of a dog leash.

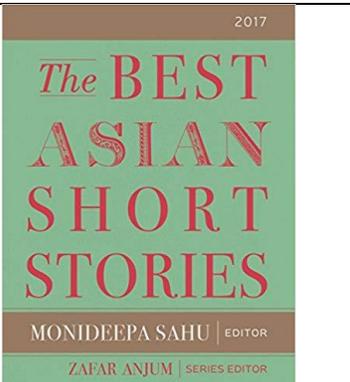
*For the longest time, I thought I was the dog sniffing around the story of my grandmother's *Girls' House*, trying to uncover it like a long-buried bone nobody could remember the location of. Turns out that it was the story that was yanking me along on a chain. Winding itself around my ankles. Being immobilised to one spot is a narrative. Unable to take a step, because one is so paralysed by history, by everything that makes us, us, is one narrative. Falling over is another narrative.*

In *Damp Matches*, Farouk Gulsara shows himself to be a master of suspense as his protagonist becomes more and more edgy at the prospect of being found out for his misdeeds. Moinul Ahsan Saber is another writer who is a master at keeping the reader in suspense. The opening pages of his story, *Powerless*, are taken up with the reaction of one man to two words that are spoken to him

by his accomplice. Will he smile or will he turn violent? We are kept guessing for quite a while and the tension never lifts as the story develops into an horrific account of a violent husband who forces his wife into prostitution so that he can live off her earnings.

Violence rears its ugly head again in *Pigs* where Francis Paolo Quina gives us a graphic account of how one boy is subjected to bullying at school and witnesses domestic violence in the home only to eventually become violent himself.

One should not fall into the trap of thinking that all stories should have a beginning and an end. The cross cultural stories in this anthology give us a snapshot of what it must be like to live in exile, to experience some of the life-changing events of a country's history, to seek refuge from war and internal conflict and to struggle to preserve one's home-grown Asian identity. Each story is a moment in time. Murli Melwani puts it succinctly when she writes "And so the present extends into the future. Stories seldom end with full stops, as they do in books. In life they end with commas." Notes on the contributors are given at the end. Fully recommended.

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Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, Scotland, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus Press, England, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, England, 2014), *Sleeve Notes* (Editura Pim, Iași, Romania, 2016) and *Finding the River Horse* (Littoral Press, 2017). His work has been translated into several languages including Dutch, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish.

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