

Farah Ghuznavi

The wide variety of stories contained in this slim volume includes very short stories, sometimes delving into science fiction and drawing dystopian visions of the future.

late into and from French for the Iyorians.

"It promised to be a challenging trip", begins the story, which goes on to recount the growing friendship between the two women, as they negotiate the logistics of transport and lodging, as they struggle with bathing and toilet facilities, and as they realize, to their chagrin, that their African guests are more at ease than themselves. Though Diya (who narrates the story), had been quite skeptical about the Francophone non-Bangla-speaking Shahana at the beginning, their nights of 'insect-slaying' and 'post-mortems' of the day's incidents bring them closer together. Development workers and microloan borrowers are the stock-in-trade of development language, but this story highlights the many changes that affect the development worker, as she works towards changing lives of the 'targets' of development practice.

A story that most women (once girls) will identify with, or at least, recognize is "Just One of the Gang." All efforts to celebrate sisterhood and feminist solidarity in our country are denuded by the (in)famous mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship (and now by the Hasina-Khaleda rivalry), but this story shows you how mean girls can be to each other. "Mean girls are *everywhere*!" exclaims the opening line of the story, which recounts the bullying and the competition that goes on among girls in the schoolyard, and the travails of the nerdy, not-so-pretty girl. A story of friendship betrayed, it also shows how each girl has to find her own strength to overcome the expectations of feminine ideals that everyone around her, including her friends, lay on her.

This story is set in a multicultural setting of an 'elite' school in the US, but the question of language and the ability of English to convey Bangladeshi realities does surface in stories that are set in rural Bangladesh. "Big Mother" (anthologized for the first time), is the literal translation of *Boroma*, who is the protagonist's stepmother, and her father's elder wife. Again the story is one of female jealousy and competition, and Lali's struggle to rise above them. Lali moves to Dhaka, taking a job in a garment factory (housed in Rana Plaza in fact), where she secretly marries her Muslim co-worker, who subsequently dies in the building collapse. The story ends with Lali waiting for a visa to the US, where presumably a new life will begin. It is in these stories that the reader is made to wonder whether the English language can convey certain realities, or certain ways of thought. When the stories have urban middle-class settings, the use of language reads more naturally, as in the first story (another favourite), "Getting There".

A story that stands out in the collection is "The Assessment". It is a short short story, and shows how even a future with do-bots and AI machines will also be used to work against women. Science does not yield utopias for women – despite Rokeya Sakhawat's description of flying machines and solar panels in "Sultana's Dream." Women are always left to fend for themselves, the heroine of this story finds out.

If the amazing variety of stories in *Fragments of Riversong* is an indication of the range of writings we can expect from writers in English in Bangladesh, we can indeed look forward to a lot of good reading. In the meantime the wonderfully complex literary-cultural debate about the language of literary expression, the potential readership of English literary writing vs writing in the mother tongue, the domination of western or imperial modes will also continue. We the readers are the beneficiaries of both the writings and the debates.

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