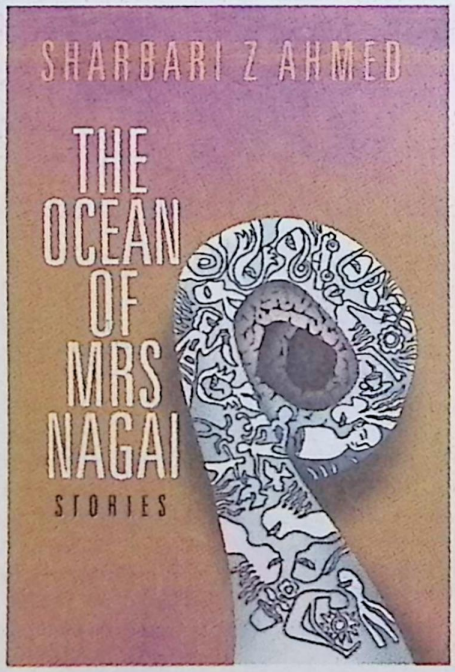
THE OCEAN OF MRS NAGAI
A REVIEW

ANIKA HOSSAIN

Sharbari Z Ahmed's, "The Ocean of Mrs Nagai," is a remarkable collection of short stories that offer glimpses into the lives of characters as varied as an old Japanese woman living in Tokyo to a Muslim Bangladeshi girl from New York. Set in a different culture and time, each story portrays events that play a defining role in shaping lives and identities of its characters.

In her stories, Ahmed addresses bold issues of class, race, politics, religion and war in a way that the readers can relate to her characters as they engage with the world around them. She takes her readers to exotic locations : Addis Ababa, Hell's Kitchen in New York, gives them a tour of Tokyo and introduces them to life in Dhaka, all the while giving them accounts of interesting cultural encounters.



Her title story is about Mrs Nagai, a Japanese woman whose husband fought as a soldier in the Second World War. Ahmed portrays this old woman's lifelong struggles to come to terms with her husband's violent past, his altered personality as a result of it and how she finally makes peace with herself.

"A Boy Who Chooses To Go To The Moon," tells the story of a day in the life of little Bangladeshi boy, living in New York City at 112th on Broadway, with a father who is trying his best to assimilate to the American culture while his mother obstinately rejects it. However, this is no ordinary day – it is the day President John F Kennedy is assassinated.

Ahmed's story "Pepsi," is about a little girl, Zara, the daughter of a Bangladeshi diplomat in Ethiopia. Unable to relate to her social peers, Zara befriends underprivileged children from the neighbourhood shanties, but this friendship unfortunately results in a police raid and eviction for their families.

"A Foreign Exchange," is the disturbing account of the fate of a young Bangladeshi social worker Illa and her American lover/colleague Katherine, who are brutally murdered by local thugs linked to a known clergyman and political leader of a village the girls were working in. The horrific nature of the crime was speculated to either serve as a warning to social workers reaching out to village women, or set an example for those who dared to be homosexual in a conservative Muslim country.

"Raisins not Virgins," one of Ahmed's most popular works, is the story of a spirited young American-Muslim woman, struggling to find herself. When she loses the man she loves to a spiritual cause she simply cannot identify with, she is forced to confront her resentment toward Islam, the religion she was born into but never quite understood. Set against the backdrop of war and political turmoil, this story portrays the struggle of young Muslim Americans trying to choose between their religion and country. This story was first written as a play by Ahmed in 2003, which she herself produced and starred in. It was later adapted as a screenplay and selected for the Tribeca All Access programme at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2008.

Short stories are often far trickier to write than say a novel where page after page can be dedicated to knowing and relating to each character and plot. Ahmed successfully establishes a relationship between her characters and her readers in just a few short pages and at the same time ties securely together a strong plot so the readers are left satisfied with a complete narrative.

Ahmed's style of writing is simple yet powerful. She writes with honesty and compassion for each of the characters compelling the readers in kind, to empathise with their situations and plight. She writes in a way that shows her trust in her readers to understand what is left unsaid. There is a refreshing touch of humour in her style that lightens and eases the way through some of the more difficult circumstances the readers are introduced to.

Each of Sharbari Z Ahmed's stories leaves the reader haunted, in its own way. We think of the protagonists, people who are so familiar they could be our friend, neighbour, a colleague or even a spouse. We wonder what became of them, long after we have put the book down. ■