

Efflorescence of South Asian Sci Fi?

Yudhanjaya Wijeratne, *Numbercaste*, ISBN: 978-1521795439, 2017

REVIEWED BY ROHAN SAMARAJIVA

I have long been a reader of science fiction. Not just for entertainment, but also for insights useful for my research and teaching. After all, the very word cyberspace was coined by William Gibson, a luminary of the cyberpunk sub-genre. I like all forms of sci fi, but find near-future science fiction the most illuminating. So I not only read, but recommend works that I particularly like.

A friend teaching about social aspects of ICTs once explained she had trouble following my reading recommendations: the plots of this form of fiction were mostly formulaic quests, she said. The characters were two-dimensional and not fully developed. She was really implying it was a male genre that I so liked—Zane Gray and Rider Haggard reworked!

I recall trying to defend Gibson and Bruce Sterling, whose protagonists were nowhere near two dimensional, and were female to boot. But most of the plots were of quest narratives, she had said. Not all of them, I had contended.

My friend should have had no difficulty with *Numbercaste*, where nothing is the subject of a quest, except perhaps a moral compass or two. She should find it of value in helping her LSE students understand some of the critical current issues being posed by social media, “fake news” and algorithm-based deci-

sion making. And all in the context of a well-crafted, near-future sci-fi novel.

The characters? They were males, most of them. The author of *Numbercaste* breaks away from the trend, at least among the sci-fi writers I read, of creating edgy female protagonists, and does so wisely. The advice that one should write what one knows about appears to have been taken. The principal characters, including the difficult narrator, are conflicted human beings settling accounts with father figures. They are worth getting to know. They help us work through some of the moral choices we ourselves face.

Near-future science fiction is about extrapolation. Good near-future writing gives us fresh insights into what’s happening in our world or what’s on the horizon. One could think of *Numbercaste* as an extended cogitation on the social-credit system being implemented in China. But it is much more.

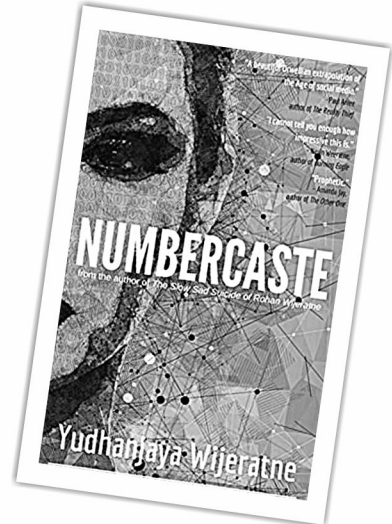
It is contemplation of the age-old problem of how people are classified into various groups and treated differently, as in the case of caste. Caste is a subject a South Asian author has an obvious advantage in, not just the original form based on birth, but also the modern mutations based on “colleges” attended, doctor versus nurse, engineer versus technical officer, and so on. South Asia has in recent decades

produced an enormous amount of creative writing. But not much sci-fi. And very few of the works in this genre have South Asian characteristics. Amitav Ghosh’s award-winning *Calcutta* and *Chrome* is, of course, a notable exception. Cross-cutting as it does between the past and the future to weave a narrative of an alternative science, it’s a difficult book to categorize. Is it about our future or about a road not taken in the past?

In Yudhanjaya Wijeratne’s book we may have the beginnings of truly South Asian science fiction, not limited to the quaint and the exotic. His writing engages self-confidently with the reality of people whose roots are here, but whose imaginations, ambitions, and domains are not limited either by geography or the globe-straddling corporations they create or shape.

The true test of a writer (other than J.D. Salinger!), however, is the second novel. We eagerly await Wijeratne’s!

Rohan Samarajiva writes and speaks mostly about technology and economics, having founded a regional think tank, IIRNEasia, which works primarily with governments, organizations and companies around the Bay of Bengal. He was read over a week of circumnavigating the Bay, Colombo, Bengaluru, Dhaka, Yangon and back to Colombo.



Church Bells and Darjeeling Tea

University Press Ltd., *Church Bells and Darjeeling Tea*, ISBN: 978-984-254-1, 2017

REVIEWED BY NUSRAT HUQ

The title of the book entices the reader. We all love Darjeeling tea, but why “Church bells”? Zeena Chowdhury’s experience of Darjeeling’s Loreto Convent, the boarding school she attended for ten years in the 1950s, is what the book is about. She tells us about the strictly defined discipline that was expected from every student, the morals and principles that were imbued in the students by the Roman Catholic Irish nuns, and the bitter-sweet memories of some of the best years of her life. She describes the building, the dorms, and particularly the gardens of the convent, but what will draw readers the most is her reflections on what she had experienced more than fifty years later. They will surely also be impressed by the vivid details, and the narration of the smallest of incidents and the most casual of conversations of the time she had spent in Loreto.

Several times a day, the church bells in the convent would ring, summoning boarders to church for Mass or to Benediction on Sunday afternoons. The nuns would attend church services more than once a day. Attending church was compulsory even for non-Catholics but. Muslim girls were allowed to fast and the staff would provide them with *sehri* and *iftar*. Puja holidays were also allowed for the Hindu girls. These were lessons in tolerance and respect for the rights of others and acknowledgement that any form of worship is commendable.

The author describes many Catholic rites and rituals. I can understand why she wanted to take Holy Communion when in a church with stained-glass windows, an altar with flowers, dozens of lit candles, paintings of the Stations of the Cross, the angelic face of the Virgin Mary and incense smells, where the priest sways the thurible and his Latin incantations intersperse with hymns from the choir. Everything combined then to make her participate in all the rituals being observed.

Zeena Chowdhury describes how during Lent the nuns did not mind abstaining from meat, egg and alcohol to mirror Jesus’ forty days of fasting. It made the girls look forward to the Easter celebrations. We actually feel her excitement in a chocolate Easter egg being cracked open or her surprise at thetoffees and chocolates in them, or delight in the marzipan eggs. She even recalls fondly the three days of retreat. She did not mind reading only religious books and not speaking for three days to spiritually enrich herself, along with the rest of the boarders. However, not communicating at all with her friends for three days was impossible! They thus wrote notes to each other then on topics like which blue-eyed nun fancied which handsome priest!

Serving humanity, humility and modesty were virtues drilled into students. The author says modestly, however, that she was not adept at playing any musical instrument, had no talent in singing, and had two left feet when attempting ballet classes.

Indeed, the anecdotes and incidents in the book reveal someone deeply influenced by the values she had learnt in Loreto. At times her self-criticism is unnecessarily harsh. She was fourteen when the boys from St. Paul’s or North Point schools came to Loreto for “socials” which included dancing with partners. She had hopes that like Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* she would be swept off her feet by some Rhett Butler. But she refers to

boy” she had ever seen!

The school curriculum was difficult but thorough. Zeena Chowdhury remembers how once as a result of her not numbering the answers in an examination she was given a zero. On Proclamation (or Report Card) day afterwards, her name was called first. This was devastating for a student usually in the top 5% of her class. But she had learnt a life-long lesson that day. Also, she had once performed poorly in Mathematics and English and was advised to repeat Class Six. In her opinion, however, it was the turning point in her school life since she changed her attitude towards studies completely that year. She focused then on reading voraciously to improve in

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herself as feeling like a wall-flower then whom no boy could have wanted to dance with. She cried silent tears then. When she turned sixteen, however, at a social in North Point school, she felt even better than Scarlett O’Hara. She was swept off her feet when she danced the evening away with “the handsomest

English and waking up an hour earlier than other boarders even on cold and foggy mornings to do so. Certainly, her writing speaks volumes for her intellectual capacity, vast knowledge and mental discipline.

The author yearns for the Darjeeling of the 1950s described in the book.

Having endless cups of Orange Pekoe Lophchu Darjeeling tea, savories and delicious pastries at Lobo’s and Glenary’s, or the dairy products at Keventer’s were things all who strolled on the Mall or Chowrasta would stop for. She still remembers the taste of the chow-mine as the best she has ever tasted.

The descriptions of the Kanchenjunga Mountains and the snow-capped Mount Everest are portrayed passionately by Chowdhury. A visit to Tiger Hill to watch the spectacular sunrise at even 4:00 am is recommended by the author.

From the descriptions of the Loreto Convent grounds and buildings, the descriptions of the garden stand out the most. The magnolias, red rhododendrons, wisterias, camellias and salvias come alive for us in the pages of the book. Skating in the school rink and gathering there for morning assembly are also happy memories for Zeena Chowdhury as are the memories of the well-stocked school library.

Next to the library was the concert hall where the annual play would be held or the weekly cinema would be shown. Chowdhury recalls humorously how the projectionist would place his hands over the lens in an attempt to censor a Hollywood film!

Zeena Chowdhury tells us about meeting Mother Teresa in the school in 1946. Celebrities like Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norwaj visited the school in 1953 after the conquest of Everest. She had studied with Princesses Shanti Shah and Sharda Shah of Nepal.

In her book Chowdhury also mentions major political upheavals and influences of the 1940s and the 50s. She writes about Direct Action Day, known also as the ‘Great Calcutta Killings’. People known to the author’s family, including a servant, were brutally killed in the riots. In 1946 when the author was a girl of seven, the students sang ‘God Save the King’ in their assemblies. The following year, in

1947, they sang the Indian National Anthem ‘Jana Gana Mana’. Being in Loreto Darjeeling and in Calcutta during the Partition of 1947 let her witness major events of Indian history.

In 1952 she watched on a school cinema screen the coronation of Princess Elizabeth as Queen Elizabeth II. Along with that momentous event came her own political awakening. It was, after all, the year of the deaths of the martyrs of our language movement. Though only thirteen years old then, the event made her question and delve into matters of national identity, human rights and political freedom. It made her conscious of her cultural roots. She was already well read in English Literature, having read Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and the poems of Keats, Shelly and Byron and lighter works by Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories by then. Now it was time for her to read Rabindranath Tagore, the works of poet Nazrul Islam, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and other Bengali writers.

The cover illustrations and the ones within the book tell a story that parallels the words of the text. Artist Shahnur Mansur has painted beautiful water color images of the school itself and of the famous Toy train chugging along the slopes of the Darjeeling hills which grew red rhododendrons, white magnolias or yellow sunflowers. It is fascinating to read about the Toy Train, described here as a unique engineering feat.

The book is indeed highly recommended for the glimpses it offers into the lost world of a pristine and sparsely populated Darjeeling, as a retelling of a happy childhood in a boarding school and of friendships that have lasted nearly eight decades, and for the depiction of those church bells that still beckon worshippers!

Nusrat Haq teaches in Sunbeams School and loves reading books.