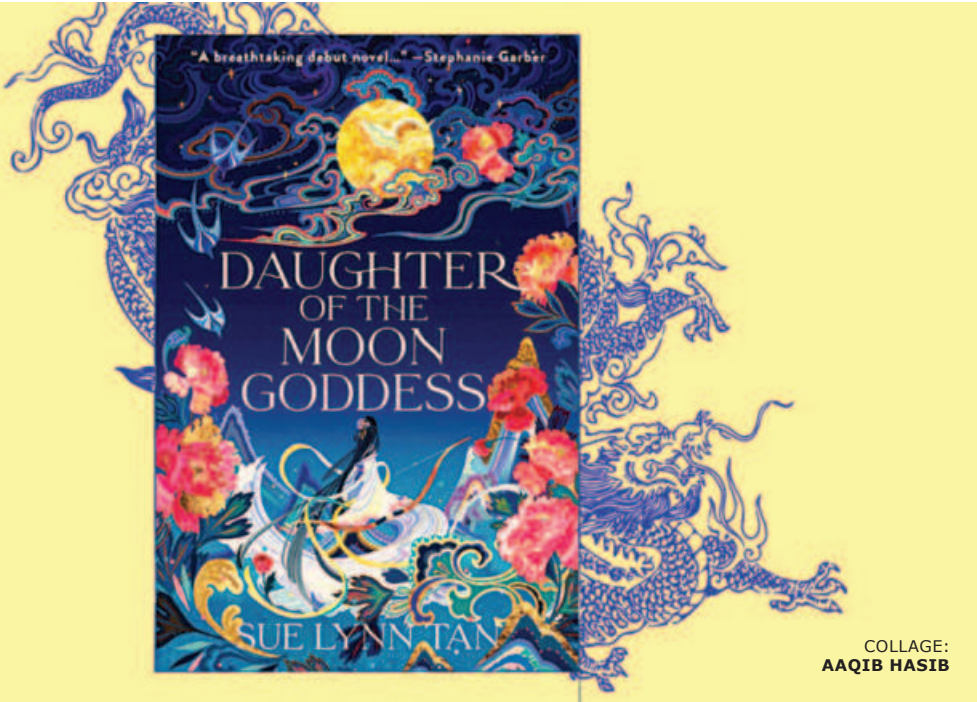


BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Of friendship, love and dragons

Sue Lynn Tan's magical debut novel about a classic Chinese legend



COLLAGE: AAQIB HASIB

In the dwindling glow, the waters of the Changjiang glittered as it wound like a fiery serpent across the emerald valley...”, I was almost transfixed by them—in my head I could imagine the very scene Tan painted with her words.

AAQIB HASIB

If you're a fantasy nut like me, you'll be acutely aware of just how "westernised"—almost to the point of being whitewashed—the entire genre is. This is, of course, a direct reflection of the fact that most of the popular fantasy writers are from the Western side of the world. And while, in the last decade, more fantasy/fiction books based in Asia and Africa have started to enter the market, they have centuries of catalogues to catch up to.

That is why it was genuinely refreshing when I came across Sue Lynn Tan's debut novel, *Daughter of the Moon Goddess* (Harper Voyager, 2022), a book where the foundations of its fantastical world is based around Chinese mythology.

Inspired by the legend of the Chinese moon goddess, Chang'e, the story follows the tale of Xingyin, daughter of Chang'e, as she goes on a magical journey to be reunited with her mother.

While there are many iterations of the tale of Chang'e, one of the popular ones is as follows: Hou Yi—the Lord Archer and the husband of Chang'e—is given the elixir of life from the Celestial Emperor after saving Earth from the emperor's sons, who had transformed into 10 suns and tried to burn the planet to a crisp. Hou Yi, however, does not want to become immortal if his wife cannot join him as one. Chang'e, who was holding the elixir for her husband, is confronted when Hou Yi's apprentice breaks in and tries to force her to hand over the elixir. In order to protect the potion, Chang'e ends up drinking it herself.

Writer Lynn Tan's novel shares a similar story, only in this instance, Chang'e has a daughter, who, with her mother, has been imprisoned by the Celestial Emperor on the moon. However, the emperor has no knowledge of Xingyin's existence.

As Xingyin grows up her powers slowly begin to manifest—despite her mother's attempts to keep them hidden—and when

the Celestial Army is able to detect a disruption on the moon, they arrive to find out what exactly Chang'e is hiding.

At its core, *Daughter of the Moon Goddess* is a story about a young woman finding her way in the world, after she is stripped of the only identity she has ever known. Xingyin, who has grown up under the protection of her mother, is thrust into the world of the immortals with no one to guide or protect her.

Tan's ability to write the emotions of love and anguish that Xingyin experiences is heartbreakingly beautiful. Seeing Xingyin growing up by herself and developing as a character—from a young girl to a woman—all while struggling with the pain of being separated from her mother and the heartbreaks that come with young love.

Tan's writing style is one of the best parts of the book. Coming across the lines, "The sun had faded to a muted orb of crimson light. In the dwindling glow, the waters of the Changjiang glittered as it wound like a fiery serpent across the emerald valley...”, I was almost transfixed by them—in my head I could imagine the very scene Tan painted with her words.

While Chang'e had sent away Xingyin so that she is safe from the Celestial Emperor, we find that she is not able to rid her heart of the grief of letting her mother rot away, imprisoned on the moon. This is the kind of internal turmoil the protagonist is frequently faced with and owing to Tan's ability to evoke a sense of empathy in the readers, we find that so are we.

Adding a defining dimension to this Young Adult novel, Xingyin is also going through the stages of youthful love and heartbreak that all of us go through at some point in our lives, which is another magical facet of the plotline that draws the readers in and hooks them to the story.

Daughter of the Moon Goddess is part of the *Celestial Kingdom duology*; the second book, *Heart of the Sun Warrior*, is set to be released in November, 2022.

Aaqib Hasib will someday finish writing his book. But not today. Write to him at aaqib.hasib@thedailystar.net.

STAR BOOKS REPORT

Budget 2022-23: Is the publishing industry only an inconsequential afterthought?

NAZIFA RAIDAH

With the Russia-Ukraine war continuing and the (consequent) wave of inflation that has struck the world, serious concerns for our publishing houses have been raised—most of which, with much struggle, were gaining back their momentum as the pandemic slowly, seemingly, started dying down. Rising prices of essential commodities such as gas and oil means that soon, a major effect will become apparent on all levels in an industrial production process, and that includes—books.

The relationship between the publishing houses and the government is sewn in through the National Book Centre (Jatiya Grantha Kendro, or, NBC), which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The National Book Centre purchases books from publishers across the country and distributes them across public and private libraries. Data from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs dictate that a sum of BDT 10,38,100 (around USD 11,000) was allocated in the 2021-2022 fiscal year to NBC.

However, publishers have claimed that they either get no purchase orders or the order that they do get is quite small, leaving little to no impact.

On the other hand, almost 1,500 private libraries are listed under NBC's database. The prodding question we're left with is this: is the allocated sum for purchasing even merely enough to support our publishers in this grave time?

Contrasting the two figures, the answer lies in the negative. The Ministry also doesn't have



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

Minar Mansur, director of NBC said, "Publishers need to bring these issues up during the recommendations taken at the National Board of Revenue in the pre-budget discussions and suggest ways in which we can support them. Their involvement during the budget making process is required."

any initiative or schemes for these publishing houses so far.

Besides, the other burgeoning issue now is the sourcing of the main component—paper. According to the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), Bangladesh is mainly an import dependent country for paper, and the local industry players pay around 47 percent in tax and duty if the total production cost is taken into consideration.

Mahrukh Mohiuddin, managing director of University Press Limited (UPL) said, "As publishers, a chronic crisis that we face is within the sourcing of the production materials, like ink, the printing plates, paper, etc. as prices are set quite high".

"The government, in order to develop our local paper houses, had imposed a 61-65 percent duty tax on imported paper," she said, further adding that while the reasoning behind this step seems to make sense, "The local paper industry has taken advantage of this by hiking up their prices—so much so that their price is almost on par with imported paper." On the other hand, though, the quality of locally sourced paper is also quite inconsistent.

On this issue, Minar Mansur, director of NBC said, "Publishers need to bring these issues up during the recommendations taken at the National Board of Revenue in the pre-budget discussions and suggest ways in which we can support them. Their involvement during the budget making process is required."

This year's budget allocated 637 crore takas to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, of which 247 crore has been allocated under the development scheme.

"Of the budget, NBC is allocated 10 percent. Half of this fund is allocated to the development of the public libraries and with the rest we place orders for books," Mansur explained.

Osman Gani, freedom fighter and CEO of Agamee Prokashoni said, "Our budget needs to be an education-friendly one. Authorities need to focus on creating reading societies, so that the overall publishing sector can flourish."

State Minister of Cultural Affairs K M Khalid said on the issue of regulating paper prices, "This needs to be brought up with the Ministry of Commerce as it is within their jurisdiction. We don't have anything new in the budget for publishers apart from the previous initiatives taken."

Nazifa Raidah is the Sub editor of City Desk at The Daily Star.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Understanding the modern woman in Tokhon Golper Tore

KHANDKER SWANAN SHAHRIAR

Tokhon Golper Tore (Pendulum Publishers, 2022) is Rifat Anjum Pia's debut collection even though she has been writing for quite a few years now. Rifat Anjum is an excellent reader and observer—two essential attributes of a good writer. The stories in this collection reflect preparation, perseverance, and the enthusiasm of a new writer. Along with these, the overall book also shows the thoughtfulness of a skilled narrator.

Two significant aspects I noticed across the seven stories of the collection are: first, they are written from the perspectives of women and are about women. Second, all the central characters are lonely women, much like male characters of a Satyajit Ray story.

The protagonists of Rifat Anjum's stories come from all walks of life. For example, the lonely elderly widow, a young female student living in a hostel, two married friends, one of whom works and the other is busy with her household, an old woman in the village, a young mother in a small town, and a girl suffering from depression—all of them represent the various aspects of real women struggling through everyday life.

"Meyad Phurano Naam", her first story, is about Nahida—a woman of 55 who wants to see the Taj Mahal. She has missed much in her life and her desire to see the Taj Mahal comes to represent that. However, a conservative society that does not appreciate widowed women to have their own dreams causes friction for her at every step. Rifat Anjum has depicted the thoughts and feelings of the elderly lady in such a convincing way that we, along with Nahida, wonder should life continue to cheat her this way?

The second story, titled, "Amar Achin Ami" is my favourite from the collection. There is more than one narrative here—one, about an artist named Samiur Rahman and his wife, Sumona. Another is about Mitu's obsession with Samiur and how, eventually, her infatuation subsides. A third plotline, that of Mitu and Kayes, depicts how they navigate through different challenges in their relationship.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

The story also explores the friendship between the "good girl" Mitu and the "bad girl" Himi. These frictions make Mitu realise how little she knows about herself.

Syed Manzoorul Islam notes in the introduction to the book, "Anjum's prose is fluid and her narration spontaneous." Furthermore, her stories reflect the complexities of modern life from a woman's perspective and she is very open and honest about her subject-matters. Some sentences can make one rethink the traditional women's role: "Big girl, don't you know your own body yet?" and "Nishi felt as if the fetus had committed suicide before they could tear it..."

Rifat Anjum's gaze is that of a woman, not of what society perceives as a "good

girl". Her compassion is for women of all creeds and classes, and allows the readers to understand the fast paced world from the eyes of a modern woman.

Tokhon Golper Tore is a rather small book, its pages crisp and the printing quality excellent. It also feels good to hold the book in hand and the publisher, Rumman Tashfique, deserves praise for that. Another interesting aspect of this publication—both the author and her publisher—are young women. Together, they have produced a collection that is indicative of a new world.

Khandker Swanan Shahriar is the Managing Director of Keymakers Consulting Ltd.

Rifat Anjum's gaze is that of a woman, not of what society perceives as a "good girl". Her compassion is for women of all creeds and classes, and allows the readers to understand the fast-paced world from the eyes of a modern woman.