



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

MERMAIDS ARE REAL

A story of the Haenyeo

Review of ‘The Island of Sea Women’ (Scribner, 2019) by Lisa See

The book has many traditional Haenyeo sayings underlying various complex social issues. “When a girl is born, there is a party. When a boy is born, there is a kick to the hip.” Females are celebrated for being the sole breadwinner, as well as giving birth to sons – for only a son can do religious rituals and ancestral rites.

JANNATI HOSSAIN

Dear readers. I want you to do something with me. Take three long breaths—as deep as you can. Now hold it for two minutes! How long did you hold? I only survived one minute and 23 seconds. And I’m used to spending time in the water.

Let me introduce the story of women who hold their breath and dive into the depths of the sea without any breathing apparatus—like mermaids. There they hunt and gather the edible treasures going as deep as 20 metres. American novelist Lisa See’s historical fiction, called *The Island of Sea Women*, is about Haenyeos, sea woman. A UNESCO inscribed intangible cultural heritage, Haenyeos comes from an ancient matrifocal society of women native to the Korean Jeju island. Yet the book is about much more.

Personally, this book is significant to me. Spontaneously picked from a bookstore a day before I was leaving for Perhentian, a Malaysian island I was staying on for my scuba divemaster training, I was instantly engaged by the title and words like ‘island’ and ‘sea women’.

However, I only started reading once I was back home, now a certified divemaster and sorely missing water; I opened the book with the hope of reminiscing. “...woman sits on the beach...used to spending time in the water”, reading these words was a balm to my soul!

The book circulates around three major themes: female friendship, forgiveness, and history. Very few historical fiction and coming of age stories touch upon complex female characters like this book does. The protagonist Young-Sook’s life is intimately intertwined with her friend Mi-ja. Young-Sook’s mother foretells this on the girls’ first day as sea workers. “Many girls have friends,

but the two of you are closer than friends. You are like sisters, and I expect you to take care of each other...” While this sets to disseminate friendship, it also creates a high expectation from it.

The beginning of the story is set during Japanese colonialism and their cruelty in Korea. Mi-ja, the daughter of a late Japanese collaborator, appears brave and outspoken, yet despised by many. Young-sook was the daughter of the Haenyeo chief—loved and respected. From sharing each other’s dark secrets, working together in a foreign country, to flirting and having ice-cream with young Russian sailors, the girls grew closer.

The book has many traditional Haenyeo sayings underlying various complex social issues. “When a girl is born, there is a party. When a boy is born, there is a kick to the hip.” Females are celebrated for being the sole breadwinner, as well as giving birth to sons. While the birth of a boy means yet another mouth to feed.

The Haenyeos consider the sea better than even their own mothers, “You can love your mother, and she still might leave you. You can love or hate the sea, but it will always be there. Forever.” However, the sea is also the place that can be the end for them, “Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back”. As a divemaster and being responsible for the safety of divers, this saying resonated with me the most. Since one cannot breathe underwater, any minor incident can become fatal. This bitter truth is realised when the character who says this breathes her last while being stuck underwater.

Sayings like “It is better to be born a cow than a woman”, are used jokingly to express the hardworking life of a woman both as sea workers and in the fields. Most of the men stay home, taking care of children, cooking,

and debating about Confucianism under the village tree.

Death, war, and multiple political crises envelop the storyline. “You aren’t aware your clothes are getting wet in the rain”, is a line from the book that highlights how change comes gradually. After a gruesome tragedy, Young-sook and Mi-Ja’s friendship become irreparable and betrayal, disappointment, and anger dominate the later part of the story. Young-Sook achingly recognises, “...I had to hold on to my anger and bitterness as a way of honoring those I’d lost.”

However, it seems that Lisa See rushes towards forgiveness and resolution in the end. Relying on the Buddhist saying, “To understand everything is to forgive”, and in the hurried introduction of a flat character—like most of the male characters in the novel—a girl named Clara, who comes and helps reconcile Young-Sook with the memory of friendship. Young-Sook lets go of anger and resentment in what seems like a forced reconsideration of everything. While some could say this conclusive self-preservation was necessary, I found the abruptness breaking the suspension of disbelief.

Nonetheless, I would recommend this book to adventurous people, especially women. Not only is this book informative, it is also well researched with an empathetic approach to culture and history. Female solidarity, discourse and laughter without the presence of the male ego, and perseverance through hard work builds the Haenyeo collective. It also shows the strength of women’s support systems through grief, disaster, and tragedy.

Jannati Hossain is an entrepreneur, scuba divemaster, marine conservationist, and an avid reader in five different languages. From the mountain to the sea, she has battled to be free.

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Balancing the act of oneness and being one with oneself

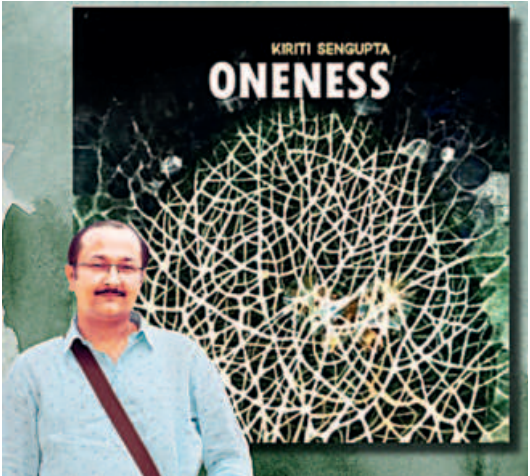
Review of Kiriti Sengupta’s ‘Oneness’ (Transcendent Zero Press, 2024)

SUTANUKA GHOSH ROY

Kiriti Sengupta is an award-winning poet, translator, editor, and publisher based in New Delhi, India. *Oneness* is his latest collection of poems. The seemingly unassuming thin volume does not prepare readers for the multi-sensory experience that is in store for them as they open the book. Even before one’s mind and eyes get used to reading, the poet jolts readers as he writes “I rived my eyes / for inditing poems. / Would you reckon them / by their length?”

His style is more impressionist and natural. Sengupta’s *Oneness* is a festival of feelings and emotions, which evokes an ambience of celebration replete with different forms of poetry. The haikus blend well with the short poems and prose poems. Sengupta has mastered the artistic discipline of haiku poems, their minimal nature forces readers to pare down to only the essentials, internalising each word or even syllable count. He writes: “...descent of grace / the priest unburdens / the donation box”. There is a focus on a brief moment in time, yoking together two heterogeneous images of the priest unburldening the donation box, and creating a sudden sense of revelation.

The volume also showcases Sengupta’s aphoristic style and teases out the magic of words with great subtlety. The paintings accompanying the poems spread the colours of poetry and paint a memorable canvas for the readers. He writes about how the ordinary and the extraordinary fuse into oneness. Sometimes his lens captures a satiric angle:



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

“plagiarism— the author examines the reader’s memory”

The accompanying painting is dramatic, the fiery red and the foliage are all frozen in time— creating an ominous atmosphere. At times, there is a personal touch when he speaks of the warmth of a woolen shawl that he uses during winter in Delhi: “Cold has an old-world spur to it. I tend to rest more with an inflated appetite. Drops of olive oil on my aging skin add to the impetus. Traditional cuisines cheerfully replace bland meals for the summer. I find warmth in shawls exuding the aroma of a fabric conditioner.”

Sengupta is a contemporary poet, hence he weaves a feminist story of power and courage, breaking free of fashion stereotypes and bringing about a huge change towards body positivity in his poem “Antara Marwah Walks the Ramp”:

“She is all smiles as she treads, flaunting her baby bump. The fashion parade looms large in the new arrival.”

Sengupta’s ink also captures a moment of catastrophe:

“In the crematorium, the priest asks me to smear ghee on my father’s skin. He ensures the fire finds Baba luscious.”

Along with the scent of ghee, the questions that linger in the mind of the reader are: Can the fire in the crematorium be put out and is there a hope of regeneration?

The illustration that embellishes the poem “Separation” uses a searching light leaving the shadow pitch dark. The black colour has accumulated on the paper to imitate the visual effect of a tree, loneliness or separation and to offer the impression that the landscape is suspended in nothingness. Sengupta writes:

“Only a little needs to be invested in sketching the worn-out tree. A charcoal or two, canvas, and span. I place myself amid the landscape to explain the prevailing isolation.”

*Oneness* merges visual art with personal narratives to create a space for reflection and discourse. Sengupta succeeds in making the abstract tangible, inviting his readers to ponder their places within the delicate balance of oneness and being one with oneself. The poetry collection comprising different forms of poetry is pinned together like a pointillist work. The cover painting by Samir Mondal and the illustrations by Pintu Biswas reinforce the reflective nature of *Oneness*.

Dr. Sutanuka Ghosh Roy is an associate professor of English at Tarakeswar Degree College, The University of Burdwan. She is a reviewer, poet, and critic who has presented papers at national and international seminars and has been published widely.

FOR THE CURIOUS WRITER

Write about the small things

This doesn’t only help when starting out as a writer, but history will show you that some of the most celebrated novelists across the west and the east have penned better and more beguiling short stories than the novels they are known for. So it helps to focus on the smaller picture. Before venturing into an entire world building or constructing a character’s entire life from starting to end, write about “an atypical (or typical) day in the life of...” Show the little things, like how a character reacts to their present surroundings, or maybe just a snapshot of the city your story is based in. By breaking down a complex structure like an overarching storyline to its mere building blocks, like just one day from the story, you are very organically fleshing out your story.

Maisha Syeda

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