

# Happiness at A Price?

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**KILLING THE WATER: STORIES**

By Mahmud Rahman

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Zadie Smith in her collection, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* has a piece where she talks of the craft of writing. In 'The Crafty Feeling', Smith says that it is when the writer reaches a point called the 'middle' that the novel and the experience of writing it begin to totally consume her. She has to finish writing it, and sees nothing else. A reader encounters something similar too, as it happened for this particular reader when reading Mahmud Rahman's fine collection of stories that move between Bangladesh and the US.

The 'middle' comes when reading this

book is no longer a desultory act, a book one can pick up and put away at will but a book that has to be finished at one go. The middle that perhaps comes towards the very end of the story, 'Kerosene', when a boy with the face of a much older, suffering man asks the narrator who has just committed a grievous crime if he *could* have stopped it; if he could at least have *tried* to stop it, and the narrator unable to reply, only wants to smash the smug face of his listener turned inquisitor. The middle occurs in a more gentle fashion a few stories later when like the narrator we have moved continents, and Carlotta returns

home and finds that the cotton fields she had hated earlier somehow look beautiful; or even in the story called the 'Interrogation' when the unnamed narrator easily realizes that idealism and one's dreams can be handled in a somewhat cynical, businesslike manner.

The imagery most of Rahman's stories evokes is that of movement. Movement, which in almost every case is irreversible, perhaps even necessary; when meanings are either lost as people are forced to leave, or when there is still a search for meaning, the chance of making a new life in a new land; and then there is also the unaccountable, strange ways movement change people. While the stories appear in a linear, chronological fashion, the first few evoke a certain period in Bangladesh while others that follow are set in the US and are stories of migrants, people who have moved far away from where 'home' once was; the sections separated by a haunting poem by Pireeni Sundaralingam.

In the beginning a long gone son returns in a motorboat he has designed himself even

34 / The Book Review / April 2010

with the knowledge that he has moved too far away to ever belong. Runa too comes home in her story towards the end, a return symbolic in many ways when past mingles with present, and she sees herself finally as having returned to die.

But then movement could also be about rivers that are forever on the move and ever-changing. Rivers and water assume a sacrosanct aspect in the title story, as the narrator's mother collects holy water from the sacred shrines she visits, yet this isn't enough to purify the streamlet that abounds their house. It is a story rife with memories and also symbolism, as it depicts a changing, ever growing city and how it poisons the rivers that run within it. The ending in this instance may appear too deliberate, but in 'Before the Monsoons Come', the ending comes to the rescue when the story threatens to remain mired in a cowardly son's meanderings.

Stories set in the Americas depict those ubiquitous places where strangers meet, newcomers come to seek comfort and where friendships happen suddenly, too tenuously

and just as quickly break apart; places like a blues bar where Carlotta's singing draws a former army captain haunted by his past and memories of his father's humiliation; or a Laundromat where a Sri Lankan could be drawn to and flirt with an attractive Dominican teenager, who grows into a guava demanding woman. The migrant's dilemma is clearly evoked in the 'Orange Line' where Sohail finds himself the victim of a thug attack one moment, and the very next is helped by a stranger on a train. There are stories where relationships happen, are sustained and perhaps don't even exist, such as Nadeem writing a series of letters to Hyacinth, only to have them all come back to him one day.

Rahman tells his stories in a fluid, deadpan and evocative style, still there are sentences that jump out of nowhere. As when Carlotta in 'Blue Mondays at the Gearshift Lounge' realizes, 'The heart plays funny tricks with one's memories'. In 'Smoke Signals' jealous Neela tells the narrator, her husband, that she doesn't 'want sloppy seconds of any kind'.

There is unexpected humour too, as in this same story when the narrator decides not to visit an old girlfriend for fear of exposing complexities in the relationship; it was a time when the US president was himself 'equivocating over the definition of sex'. The deft humour is most evident in a story playfully titled, 'Yuralda'; two strangers from different places find love in a Laundromat, she wants a 'guayaba' (guava) and he goes crazy looking for one, and attempts to prevaricate by bringing her different stuff each time: guava jelly, a picture of a guava, etc.

Movement too is at most times accompanied by hope, a promise of finding something different. There is in these stories unified by that one theme, violence and loss, pain and unshed tears as in those that make up the first half of this collection; while in the later stories, narrators in the new land grasp at the promises offered of a new love, a new life, even as there is the realization that happiness comes at a price, and with its own pain.

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