

Book Reviews

Sushma Joshi. 2008. *The End of the World: A Collection of Short Stories*. Kathmandu: FinePrint Books.

The End of the World is an impressive collection of eight short stories in English by the Kathmandu-based columnist, artist, blogger and filmmaker Sushma Joshi. A fresh and outward-looking literary sensibility has been brought to bear on the recent past and present lives of Nepalis. The book includes details on foreign-returned Nepalis, households in Kathmandu, lahure lives abroad, village politics, natural disasters, and the Nepal Police. Nearly all of the stories are set within the last fifteen to twenty years with the notable exceptions of “Match-Making” and “Cheese” making the book, additionally, something of an artistic first draft on the recent Nepali past.

The stories map the limited choices facing a range of Nepalis in different periods of torment and life struggle. None of the main characters has reached a position of power and responsibility yet, all of the marginal men and women are buffeted about by impersonal forces and all long for change or a solution. Part of the power of the collection derives from this recognition of the ordinary, everyday choices facing Nepalis as well as Joshi’s own keen eye for the absurd and humorous. However, the dilemmas and transitions are not only Nepal-specific. Joshi also moves many of her characters into representations of universal positions and truths, in prose which should have wide appeal beyond Nepal.

The opening story (“Cheese”) brilliantly depicts the meeting point of foreignness with Nepal through the tale of Gopi, a cousin and household help brought to Kathmandu, and his longing for cheese. Along the way the tale tells something of the expansion of foreign travel in Nepal and the reality of Gopi’s young life. In the story one family member, possibly in the 1950s after Tribhuvan airport has opened, comes back to Nepal from Switzerland with the then only authentic proof of attendance in *videś* – cheese, a name which confuses Gopi for its similarity to the Nepali for “thing” (*cij*). The young Gopi misses out on cheese during the ritual of unpacking of gifts, and thus nurtures his own desire for cheese and work abroad, both only fulfilled 25 years later after his own labor in Kuwait.

Joshi cleverly weaves in the impact of foreignness and foreign things in the years after Tribhuvan airport opened up. The changing nature of

gifts from foreign lands is noted, from cheese and Rolexes to “fridges and washing machines” (p. 20). For the young Gopi “the humble thing-i-ness of the word” cheese “suddenly travelled to the exotic underworld of the senses and came up packaged in silver foil and cardboard, smelling faintly of time zones and jetlag...” (p. 15). The story also highlights Nepali elements of the global drive to be modern, an obsession with development and a clamor for all things foreign combined in a humorous modern-day morality tale. It might usefully be read alongside Mark Liechty’s article on foreignness in this journal (Liechty 1997).

“Match-Making” is an evocative account of a life-changing moment in 1940s India. It depicts, in short but weighty prose, the meeting of a Nepali girl, Sharmila, in Calcutta with a prospective groom’s older Aunts. The story captures the tension, on their way to the meeting, between the maturing but still young Sharmila and her mother, issuing injunctions to her daughter and desperate for the match to succeed. The Aunts treat Sharmila like cattle and check for “the most pertinent trouble spots – obedience, patience, mental and physical wholeness, skin color” (p. 123). The seriousness of the meeting and of the older women is counterbalanced, for the reader, by access to Sharmila’s humorous and angry thoughts and her inconvenient and inauspicious early period. Looking into her mouth Sharmila speculates that the Aunts, pleased by her teeth, may have seen “the world illuminated inside it, just as Krishna’s mother had done when she opened his mouth to see if he had stolen the butter” (p. 119). The final passages of the story beautifully capture a historic moment of self-recognition for Sharmila.

“Betrayal,” is a well-crafted tale told from the point of view of Gautam who betrays and then was betrayed in turn by his former best friend Mahesh. The history of Gautam’s relationship with Mahesh weaves in work in India, time in the Maoist movement and more recent migration work as a runner to and from Hong Kong. The bitterness of Gautam, angry with himself, the world and his choices, resonates throughout the story. This includes his pain at his wife leaving him “That bitch. I should have known better, I should have never married her” (p. 28), the realization from Mahesh in Bombay that both men were “missing...not sex, of which we had plenty, but love” and this despair which “had finally driven us both back to our home country, the thought of pure, unimaginable loneliness” (p. 35).

This constant disappointment at what life has offered him includes eventual rejection of the Maoists. Gautam, fed up with eating stolen and old rice, betrays Mahesh first when he “...sneaked away and ran to town

as fast as my little legs could carry me” (p. 41). The lowlights and unhappiness of Gautam’s life continue until he, in turn, is dramatically betrayed. Occasionally, the nature of the shift in Gautam’s register and narrative—from crudeness to grand philosophy—is a little confusing and unrealistic.

The collection also includes a comic tale about a Nepali policeman in “Law and Order.” The story is built around the binary hunger of Bishnu, a new recruit to police headquarters in Kathmandu, for both women and food. Being part of new recruits with only “plain uniforms,” (p. 77) Bishnu begins police life in prison-like conditions. Bishnu’s longing, as intense as other characters, is moderated by antics and ability to joke his way through life. He fails the horse-riding part of the British army recruitment test as “the horse dragged him for fifty spectacular meters to the edge of a field” (p. 73) leading to worries about “the permanent damage sustained by his balls...” (p. 74). He jokes his way into the Nepal Police by playing a harmonica. The chapter includes a hilarious description of Bishnu running extra jogging laps as a punishment for drunkenness inside police headquarters.

Like “Cheese” the chapter also elucidates the options and thoughts of characters through lists, in Bishnu’s case this includes all the possible ways of getting extra food supplies. Through these lists the inner mental decision-making process of characters such as Bishnu is communicated in a clear but also comic manner, as they fail or succeed in fulfilling their own goals. Joshi is successful in allying Bishnu’s dreams of food and women when “at night...he dreamt the girl in the red kurta had transformed into a long, elegant stalk of radish...” (p. 82). Unlike other characters, Bishnu does partly fulfill his dreams but he also realizes a common truth, namely that “his mind would always be roving over unreachable landscapes of desire...” (pp. 94–95).

Amongst the collection only “The Blockade,” about a desperate young boy from a starving village in Kalikot is less successful. It relies on a muddled narrative, containing everything from recent politics and the twelve-point agreement to Ram Bomjom, the Buddha boy. The story also contains an unsubtle depiction of recent Nepali politics, a topic already difficult to write original material on. The other stories in this collection of eight, however, are well constructed and fresh.

In contrast to “The Blockade,” “Waiting for Rain” begins by painting an authentic political backdrop before zooming into the teahouse chat of Churay Khola and the sorry tale of how Harka lost ownership of his land. While continuing to address universal questions Joshi, as in other

chapters, brilliantly describes micro images of Nepal, such as the bees swarming around the “orange jelabis, piled up in small mounds on top of the dirt-streaked glass cupboards” (p. 53) in the teashop. “Green Dragonfly,” is the tragic tale of the death of one sister in a landslide following monsoon rains. It dramatizes the sheer force of nature as well as rivers which “are awakened by the monsoon to rage over the voluptuous folds of the Mahabharat hills in a heavenly tantrum of destruction” (p. 127). The story convincingly travels back from the present, into the sad events of a past landslide.

The title story, “The End of the World,” describes one family’s response to a learned sadhu’s prediction that the world is about to end. Kanchi is pragmatic about the coming end of times but her husband, Dil, and son are profligate and celebrate by buying meat and oranges. The situation is laced with humor by Joshi in sentences such as “the end of the world was supposed to happen at eleven am. Kanchi wanted to deal with the event on a full stomach” (p. 102). The story mocks the gullibility, rumor-mongering and herd mentality of the crowd, leaving realists such as Kanchi to wonder about survival tomorrow. There is also an amusing incidental portrait of a foreign development worker.

The whole collection has a unity of purpose, common themes (longing, desire) and is eminently readable. The experience of being outside your country, for some writers and artists, enables a different perspective. *The End of the World* benefits too from Joshi’s multiple and deep perspectives on Nepal, as a USA-returnee. Joshi’s amusing and subtle phrases and depictions are both stylistically pleasing and the product of hard thinking about Nepali lives today. The book is only let down, in a minor sense, by elements of “The Blockade” and occasional sloppy editing. Universal representations of longing for food, love or change are successfully interwoven inside stories set in very Nepal-specific contexts. This, perhaps, also reflects Joshi’s own artistic preoccupations with “the global and the local” (the title of her weekly column in *The Kathmandu Post*).

This reader looks forward to future writing by Joshi and hopes this will include a novel length treatment of lives and events in Nepal today. This collection certainly illustrates the simple point that English language fiction in Nepal no longer needs special allowances from reviewers or constant comparisons with English language fiction in India. National comparisons will always be present and clearly support for English language writers in Nepal could be improved. But to even suggest that English language fiction in Nepal has suddenly come of age seems

patronizing. Joshi too, unless I am mistaken, is not writing to further the prestige of Nepal but to report her response to the local world she knows. Our responses therefore should be on that of artistic merit, in which Joshi succeeds. The marginal men and women of Nepal are given voices in *The End of the World* which is a collection to be read and re-read.

References

Liechty, Mark. 1997. Selective Exclusion: Foreigners, Foreign Goods and Foreignness in Modern Nepali History. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 2(1): 5–68.

James Sharrock
UNMIS, Sudan