

Pranaya Rana. 2015. *City of Dreams*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

For those who follow Nepali writers who write in English, Pranaya Rana needs no introduction. His stories and essays have been delighting readers for

years. Hence, the collection of his short stories, *City of Dreams*, was widely anticipated, and it is no surprise that this book is such a treat to his readers.

Rana's collection comprises a wide range of themes and experiences. And though the stories specifically mention Nepal only a few times, they somehow read as distillations of several decades of Nepali life. And that is where Rana succeeds without even trying. Something binds these stories together to give them a feeling of essential Nepaliness. Perhaps it is the little Nepali words scattered all over, perhaps it is Nepali traditions like *mār hānne* in *Daśāi*, perhaps it is the passages evocative of the places that can only exist in Kathmandu: from Thamel to Patan to the ruined house of Boris Lissanevitch, a Russian ballet dancer who established Nepal's first international standard hotel and became a local legend.

Though Rana picks his stories from the same places, the variety of styles Rana uses in this little collection is remarkable. To begin with, some of the stories reflect the influence of magic realism made famous by Latin American writers. The first story 'City of Dreams,' for example, where a city dreams of grand versions of itself and the protagonist walks into it, is very luscious in its description of the dreamed city.

And if you, like me, think the story 'City of Dreams' is a little too bland for its prominence of objects rather than people, Rana hits you with a sensuous story full of people in the following story, 'The Smoker.' It is a story of multiple identities: there are multiple Pranayas and multiple Mayas, and it is left to the reader to decide if some of them are imagined. And here Rana acknowledges the influence of the writers he channels: the main character follows a girl reading *Rayuela* (by the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar), and the narrator references another Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. And then there is a strange, surreal story of a night where friends wander into a deserted village and come across animals they have only seen in their dreams. 'The Presence of God' almost feels like a horror story, but for reasons unknown, Rana pulls it back from that brink and ends it as a story of internal questioning. Are they in the presence of god, or just the opposite?

But then, Rana brings you back to reality with stories of boyhood. Scattered all over the book is that powerful, universal theme that so many writers obsess over, and yet everyone has a unique view of: growing up. From William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) to Mark Twain's mischievous *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and J.M. Barrie's deceptively simple *Peter Pan* (1911), the theme is a recurring one in English

literature. Famous writers continue to owe their fame to new interpretations of this same old theme: J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are examples, and so is the book that sold: the *Harry Potter* series (beginning in 1997) written by J.K. Rowling.

In Rana's book we find different facets of this theme. In 'Dashain' there is a boy who decides that killing a goat is a good way to impress his crush. In 'The Red Kurta' there is a pampered young man who takes a drastic step after a teenage exploration of sexuality goes wrong. Rana's portrayal of an old friendship of three youngsters in 'Our Ruin' is particularly poignant, taking you back to the days when friends meant everything. Rana portrays his men young and carefree: until something bad happens to them and they are forced into the inevitable world of adults.

Rana's female protagonists, on the other hand, have histories, aches, wounds, pains, scars, and sorrows, unlike the boys. Or they will soon acquire one, like the woman haunted by whatever she hit with her car (in 'The Child'). Perhaps Rana intended his men and women to be so different, or perhaps he did not. But anyway, to me it feels like a truthful representation of Nepali society. A sensitive, nuanced, and sympathetic portrayal of female characters is always welcome.

These women are mostly past the stage of adolescence where he leaves his men: the masseuse with a mysterious scar that she will not discuss with her clients (in 'Maya'), the wife with the abusive husband (in 'Knife in the Water'), and the woman who is attracted to a vaguely repulsive colleague (in 'The Child'). Rana captures the women at a point where they are struggling to cast off their current life. Sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they don't. But the focus here, for Rana, seems to be on their internal exploration. On how these particular women think and feel, rather than on what the outcome is.

The ending of many of his stories is usually a surprise. However, these endings do not come about from events, but from the change in a character's way of thinking or perceiving. They aim not towards a denouement, but rather towards reflection. They make you pause, and go back to the beginning of the story to check if what you read at the beginning was right, and then think again and review everything you have read before. In 'Maya,' did the masseuse really acquire a bruise when she was out cutting grass? In 'Knife in the Water,' is the woman who silently suffers abuses really so meek? And

in ‘The Child,’ what actually happened to the woman who hit a dog on her way home from work and went berserk?

Rana’s focus on his characters’ internal lives, rather than the larger external circumstances, makes his book different from some earlier works of English fiction from Nepal. A veritable storm of political and social changes, sometimes devastating, has engulfed Nepal and its people for several decades now. But to read stories by the young Rana, who no doubt grew up with this storm like the rest of us, you would never know. There are slight glimpses here and there, like in ‘Maya,’ of the country’s traumatic present, but Rana makes it clear that that is not his story. This concentrated focus on people of the capital city, Kathmandu, could be called myopic, but Rana manages to use it to his advantage.

In many of Nepal’s English books of the earlier generation, one felt like the writer was trying to create the ‘grand Nepali novel,’ so to speak. These multi-generational stories that spanned across time and place were often interspersed with bits of Nepali history and gritty details (but the grand Nepali novel proved elusive). There have been several international writers who have written ‘grand narratives’ that readers of fiction, at least, have come to identify with the story of their country: Khaled Hosseini of Afghanistan (*The Kite Runner*) and Arundhati Roy of India (*The God of Small Things*) come to mind, though there are many more. As a Nepali reader I felt that Nepali writers in English were attempting to do the same: trying different techniques to find the one that would distinguish Nepali writing among international writers, establish the voice of Nepal, to represent Nepal even. To tell *the* story of Nepal. And this they were trying to do by writing comprehensive, overarching books with a journalistic bent. But though the books were otherwise well written and composed, to the familiar Nepali reader such historical information would be redundant, and to the outsider, perhaps inadequate. Nepali writing in English, one felt, was struggling to come out of its cocoon.

In contrast to many Nepali writers of the previous generation who wrote in English like Samrat Upadhyay, Rana makes little attempt to give a comprehensive history of Nepal. Somehow, and all of a sudden, young Nepali writers seem to have lifted off that yoke of establishing their identity through fiction. Their unstrained naturalness is a relief. Rana comes from that younger batch, completely ditching attempts at an overarching narrative, thus letting his stories free to explore the characters. The caterpillar, it would seem, has

shed its cocoon, and the butterfly is out. Rana's debut is an example of the young generation of Nepali writers who write fearlessly in English with a sure, confident command of the language, and without a lot of historical baggage that can weigh down less skilled writers. It is proof that Nepali writing in English has come of age. Perhaps one day we will have our own grand narrative and its place in world literature, but until then, we have the little delights from this young writer to celebrate.

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