

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Evening is The Whole Day by Preeta Samarasan. London: Fourth Estate, 2008, 340 pp.

Preeta Samarasan's debut novel tells the story of a wealthy Indian immigrant family, the Rajasekharan and how lies and secrets affect and subsequently destroy its household. Set in a "springless summerless autumnless winterless land" (p. 1), that is, Malaysia, the book begins with the departure of the family's servant girl, Chellam, after which a chain reaction of past secrets is unleashed and gradually exposed as the novel unfolds. Chronologically, although the story is set in the 1980s, the novel makes liberal temporal leaps in order to prescribe a sense of historical continuity. For example, the reader is transported at one point to the late 1800s, when Appa's (the head of the household) father arrived in the Malay peninsula in order to make a living; at another point, the reader encounters the 1950s, and witnesses the unconventional courtship between Appa and Amma. This deployment of various temporalities is also a strategic means through which the plot's complexity is enhanced. Samarasan is obviously a skillful storyteller: while she deploys an omniscient narrator, her non-linear narrative structure (flashbacks dominate the narrative) enables the withholding of secrets so that their eventual revelations are exposed in a shocking and unexpected manner. In the end, the novel's pointed message is that the present can never supersede the past, for the former is premised on the latter. From the excessively drawn-out episode of Paati's (the grandmother) death in the bathroom, to subtle hints of incest, Samarasan cleverly controls the way in which knowing and unknowing are negotiated. Samarasan's keen observation of behaviour and social mores is also crucial to the story, especially because it brings her characters to life.

On a metafictional level, Samarasan's narrative can be read as a metaphor for the intricate nature of Malaysia's search for identity. I see *Evening is The Whole Day* as an honest (although at times vulgar) reflection of Malaysian society. Perhaps the past in the novel is given so much prominence because it explains the condition of the country today: as such, in gesturing toward the past, the text is also speaking of the present. Samarasan's novel is laden with binarisms that allude to this: Paati is both a living person (the past) and a ghost (the present), although only Aasha, Rajasekharan's youngest daughter, can see her in the latter form. In fact, Aasha is gifted with a "second-sight," and can see, apart from her grandmother, the other household ghost as well: the illegitimate, half-caste daughter of the previous (white) owner. Samarasan privileges Aasha's viewpoint above all the other characters, thus allowing the narrative to entertain many barbed and sometimes discomfiting scenes that an innocent child can witness and describe, but cannot comprehend or appreciate their sometimes dangerous qualities. Like Aasha, contemporary Malaysians are haunted by the past, which

arrives "from all directions, united by their unhealthy fascination with tragedy, with unfinishable business and lingering discontent" (p. 41), but often with little understanding of their significance.

Samarasan's novel bears many experimental qualities, chief of which is the way it parodies the English language. There is much wordplay and words spelt in curious ways throughout the text, which are intermixed with untranslated Tamil and Malay words. Such a strategy situates the novel neatly within a postcolonial context: here, a colonial legacy is paradoxically used to mock and construct, while native voices are reclaimed in the midst of this. The hybridization and localization of the English language further attest to the narrative's postcolonial dimension. Speech patterns of Indian-Malaysians are vibrantly articulated alongside slangs and dialects used by the diverse ethnic groups in the country. In this way, Samarasan's depiction of Malaysian culture and social order is convincing and resonant.

The critical acclaim that Samarasan's debut novel has received is well deserved, but there is one aspect which, for me, significantly undermines it. Like many novels written by Malaysians, racial stereotyping seems to dominate Samarasan's work as well: the drunk, wife-beating Indian, the lazy Malay, and the opium-sniffing Chinese tin-miners all make an appearance without any attempt on the part of the novel to at least complicate these stereotypes. Also evident is the stereotypical notion that the grass is always greener on the other side, that is, the West. Consistently in the novel, the West is envisioned in desirable terms, signifying progress, freedom, individuality, agency and success, among other things. From Appa's Oxford degree to Uma's departure to the United States to pursue her studies at Columbia University, the novel unabashedly instigates the superiority of the West over an East that is embroiled in quarrelsome behaviour, hateful secrets and ideological straitjacketing. As if to establish this point unmistakably, the novel tellingly ends with Uma's departure and therefore, escapes from both her destabilised family and country.

The year is 1980 and while the Rajasekharans may appear to have moved on with their lives, the past remains an ever-present specter that haunts and vexes all hope for reconciliation. In this way, despite the chronological shifts, there is a sense of stasis overwhelming the family, and directly, the novel. Fears, uncertainties and unrequited longing are, after all, sentiments that can resonate indefinitely, and undermine any semblance of forward movement. This condition may describe the

Rajasekharan family, but it is also one that continues to define contemporary Malaysia to a degree.

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