

Book Review

A World Elsewhere by Shanta Acharya. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-4917-4364-5. pp. 360. Price: £12.

Anita Money

A World Elsewhere has been described as a coming of age novel and also a feminist novel addressing the situation of women and their responses to the cultural expectations of their society but while this type of categorising of genre has its uses it can also limit perceptions. In my view this first novel by Shanta Acharya, an established poet, is offering something broader and it is more interesting to see it in relation to the work of other Indian writers writing in English whose backgrounds vary but who share in different degrees their own and English culture, a mixed heritage created by colonial rule.

Shanta Acharya has a deep emotional and intellectual attachment to India and has written about the influence of Indian thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this novel, as in her poetry, there is an idiosyncratic combination of a matter-of-fact and often ironic awareness of things with an abstract philosophical mode of thought related to a cultural and genetic reality where fate is both in our stars and in ourselves.

The novel is set in Orissa, post-independence, and a familiar India is evoked with its multiple influences and pervasive reminders of the British presence. Acharya uses a number of Indian words like *jejebapa* and *jejema* (grandfather and grandmother) *Bakshish*, *biddi*, and *chowkidar* which may be known to readers but there is a useful glossary provided for less familiar words and the coinage *Eve-teasing*, a euphemism used in South Asia to mean street harassment, reminds one that English counts as one of the numerous languages of India, mutating to Indian-English. Behind this India lies a silent older India and I recall a line from Acharya's poem "On First Reading the *Bhagavad Gita*" "From an ancient land we came/ A continent vast as Memory."

Armita, or Asha as she is known, is the heroine of this story, the only daughter of an educated and upright Brahmin family called Guru and it is in her relationship to her family, particularly her mother Karuna, that you gain a more complex psychological picture of someone whose philosophical insights and discussions with cousins and friends we are introduced to but whose physical appearance is left to our imagination, though we are told she is beautiful. As a young child she shows a particularly sensitive response to rituals and ceremonies, enjoys meditative silences and is devoted to a polished stone which becomes

her childhood confidante. When the children play-act parts from the Indian Epics she as the youngest is given the less desirable evil roles which she is incapable of dramatizing to grand effect, instead making evil seem powerless and provoking laughter: “In those golden days, kings and queens always won, as did gods and goddesses. The evil one lost and suffered a terrible end. Shaitan did not have the best lines or the best tunes. In Asha’s world good and bad knew their place and never upset the status quo....”

As she grows older and her position as the youngest is overtaken by the birth of another brother, she keeps a diary where she confides her feelings of angst and a sense of being unloved because of tensions with her mother. She finds comfort, romance and freedom in literature. She has been reading Jane Austen and wishes to fall in love with someone of her own choosing, worried by the looming prospect of an arranged marriage.

Karuna whose mother died too young to pass on the domestic skills which she had to learn the hard way as a young bride of fifteen is keen to teach Asha how to cook and manage a household though also encouraging a good education, proud of Asha’s intellectual abilities and moreover encouraging her daughter’s writing, having herself been a writer until the demands of her family took over. Asha is to have all the accomplishments which will attract a really good match when the time comes to arrange her marriage. Asha however finds romance with a fellow student called Anand whose gift of an edition of Keats’ letters begins a courtship consisting of a romantic exchange of ‘love’ letters that shared private confidences.

Anand is a character whom we see from outside and he remains someone we do not fully understand. There is a memorable description of Asha’s arrival, after her wedding, at Anand’s family home which is a ‘bleak house’ with no welcoming ceremony, spartan and cold in contrast to the warmth of her own home. The spiritual guru of his family is Maa, the disciple and collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, whereas the Guru family shrine consists of deities from the Hindu pantheon to whom they pray but worship only God, the nameless one.

“You are beholden to no one but God, all our gods are mediators.’ Her parents and grandfathers had told her so – independently, on different occasions, expressing exactly the same sentiments. It had never been a problem for Asha to pray in church to Christ or Mary. They too, like the Hindu gods, were mediators....When asked to pray to Maa, it was not a problem for her.”

Asha finds that she is expected to complete her morning rituals in less than half an hour before starting to cook and there is a wry humour in the remark: "Bathing was not the sort of artistic accomplishment it was back home."

She discovers with a deep sense of violation that her letters to Anand have been left lying around casually for all to see, and that his sister has copied from them in order to win her husband, which she has successfully done, probably largely thanks to the letters as Anand remarks with no sense of embarrassment or guilt. For his part he has lied about his age so that Asha's and his horoscopes should match and there are further lies. Any element of comedy is extinguished by his callous disregard for her feelings and her realisation that he does not seem to care. Instead of love there is resentment of her family and her. His increasingly erratic and violent behaviour is a prelude to tragedy.

This unlucky marriage is presented without sensationalism nor is it the main focus of the novel though marriage is certainly a theme and the coincidental failure of both Asha's and her brother Vikram's marriages, the one a 'love' match, the other 'arranged', show that there is no guarantee of success either way. The Guru family are able to absorb these failures though not without hurt at the dishonest exploitation of their decency in honouring marriage agreements and concern for their children. It is an irony that Karuna, to the consternation of the family, suddenly feels she has to get away and leaves to stay with her father Aja. You realise the dependence of the family on the security and stability offered by Karuna and Aditya's long standing marriage and her role in sustaining this. Unlike the marriages of Asha and Vikram, there have been no deceptions and it is more, as in many marriages that they reach a doldrums but can recover. Karuna, to everyone's relief, eventually returns and all is well. The family can reassert its strength as a fixed point, a place of return.

There are many moments of recognition – situations with which the reader can identify: Asha's first day at school when she is too self-conscious to ask to go to the bathroom, holding out until it is time to go home, then walking in a peculiar way that puzzles her mother as she approaches the rickshaw and finally, with the movement over the bumps in the road, unable to control her bladder any longer, soaks the rickshaw, to her humiliation, just at the moment of arriving back; the Guru family visit to meet Tanuja, prospective wife for Vikram, who does not say a word and is answered for by her mother at every

question, something which worries Vikram but is put down to shyness by the male Gurus whose female members on leaving exchange their views: “She is attractive enough – maybe a bit plump...but...;” the conversation between Asha and Kumari, the servant in Anand’s family home, about taking care of her teeth which have been blackened by Kumari’s constant smoking of pica and her part joking response to the newly married Asha, “Everything is bad for you – even marriage!” – revealing without self-pity that her husband comes home drunk and beats her up every night.

The vagaries of human behaviour and the problems of good and bad are an underlying theme while individual dramas are given perspective against a panoramic stretch of daily realities: caste, extended family politics, relations with servants, the anxieties, economic and social pressures in marriage arrangements, education and status, politics at work, bureaucracy, corruption, world politics – but also food and celebrations, rituals at home and public festivals following the rotation of seasons, reminder of life, death and rebirth, symbolised by the gods and goddesses who are ceremoniously immersed in the eternal river after their time of glory.

Asha, who has been working as a lecturer, has been the subject of unpleasant gossip because of her unhappy marriage and has even had her degree papers marked down as a result of professional jealousy, though this is luckily rectified. At the end of the novel she is preparing for an unknown future in Oxford. We see her at the airport, ready to board a plane to England, leaving behind all that is familiar. The reader at this point can, like her, wonder what lies ahead and perhaps think about the relationship between fact and fiction and the writer’s ability to draw us in to a secondary world with its own imaginative truth – A World Elsewhere.

- *Anita Money has been organising, since 2003, work experience and enrichment opportunities for students at an inner city comprehensive which reflects both the multicultural and class realities of London. Her father, John Bicknell Auden, Wystan Hugh Auden’s brother, worked for the Geological Survey of India until just after India’s Independence. Her mother, Sheila Bannerjee, a painter, was granddaughter of W.C. Bannerjee, the First President of the Indian National Congress. Born in Calcutta in 1941, she studied English at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford.*

