

Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*

Reviewed by Sohomjit Ray

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders. Daniyal Mueenuddin. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009. 247 pages. ISBN: 978-0-393-06800-9.

Should Daniyal Mueenuddin's debut collection of short stories, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009) be considered a part of Pakistani literature, or should it be considered a part of the American literary landscape, already so enriched by the writers of South Asian diaspora? Salman Rushdie's inclusion of the first story in the collection ("Nawabdin Electrician") in the anthology entitled "Best American Short Stories 2008" by no means settles the question, but provides a useful frame in which to discuss it. The consideration of the question of nationality with regards to literature (it is fully debatable whether such a thing can be said to exist, although that debate is well beyond the scope of this review), of course, generates another very pertinent one: is the question important at all? In response to the latter question, one needs only to look at the reviews of the book published in a few of the renowned American newspapers to realize that the question *is* important, and also why.

Dalia Sofer notes in her review of the book in *The New York Times* that "women in these stories often use sex to prey on the men, and they do so with abandon at best and rage at worst — in this patriarchal, hierarchical society, it is their sharpest weapon" and that "the women are not alone in their scheming. Manipulation unifies these stories, running through them as consistently as the Indus River flows south of Punjab," before concluding: "[f]or a country whose name means 'land of purity,' Pakistan is startlingly blemished." Michael Dirda remarks in his review in *The Washington Post* how "[t]hese connected stories show us what life is like for both the rich and the desperately poor in Mueenuddin's country, and the result is a kind of miniaturized Pakistani 'human comedy.'" The consensus is clear—eight short stories in a collection by a debutant can be said to authentically portray a whole nation. If the women in Mueenuddin's stories use sex to their advantage, and men show themselves to be as adept in manipulation as the women, the Pakistani society can be safely concluded to be 'blemished.' It is expected of these stories

to show “us,” the audience from the global North—the consumer of the delicious tales about unscrupulous thieves and seductive sweepresses in the third world—exactly how the petty and grand machinations of God’s plenty contrive to construct a *comédie humaine à la Balzac* in miniature in the global South.

It should be noted that Mueenuddin neither claims nor disclaims the status of being an insider who is in a position to supply knowledge accessible only to the members of a particular in-group, in this case, the redoubtable and putative monolith of Pakistani society. Speaking about his sense of identity to Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg of *The Wall Street Journal* he comments: “There is no balancing my sense of identity. I’m always rolling back and forth along the spectrum, from Pakistani to American, depending on what I’m doing and where... I believe that this fluid identity is useful to me as a writer, because I’m always looking at myself and my surroundings from the outside.” This can be dismissed as sitting on the fence, or falling in line with the classical figure of the unobtrusive but observant poet found in Browning’s “How It Strikes a Contemporary”:

He took such cognizance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note;
Yet stared at nobody--you stared at him,
And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know you and expect as much. (ll. 30-35)

The choices Mueenuddin makes as a writer might be a reason why his stories are read to be so stringently representative. Historically, the short story cycle has been used by authors who have emphasized a strong sense of place or community in their works: James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and more recently, Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozshah Baag* (1992). It can be argued that what these authors attempt is a negotiated verisimilitude in their works—negotiated by their subjectivity and aesthetic predispositions—and not absolute representational veracity (if there exists such a thing) or authenticity. Nothing excuses a conflation between the two, especially on a national scale.

Any impulse to offer grand cultural/national generalizations lightly after reading these stories seems all the more unintelligible, because Mueenuddin demonstrates clear signs of transcending the local, the specific, and the individual to gradually bring the universal into focus. In these stories populated by characters from all cross-sections of a society that is in transit from an old, feudalistic lifestyle to a burgeoning capitalist globalized economy, the need of human beings to connect

with each other becomes paramount. In “A Spoiled Man,” Rezak becomes angry when his effort to share a “time-expired bird” is politely rejected by the waiter at Kalapani Bazar (223). The tragedy in the lives depicted in these stories stem basically from losing a precious human connection achieved after much compromise and deliberation.

The nature of the compromise offered as a price of this human connection is heavily gendered. The women in the stories use sex, but not so much to ‘prey’ as to find the joy of connecting to another human being. In “Saleema,” we find a woman who uses her sexual charms without any scruples. As the narrative voice comments, “[h]er love affairs had been so plainly mercantile transactions that she hadn’t learned to be coquettish” (40). Desperately seeking male protection in a strictly patriarchal society that would not tolerate sexual agency in a woman, Saleema still retains the human need for companionship and intimacy. When her affair with the cook in the Harouni household fails, she “angle[s] for one of the drivers,” but rebuffs their crude come-ons with a terse “Go to hell” (32). She is not looking for just protection and sex, but a deeper intimacy. Her one question to Rafik before they part forever is to verify that she had, in fact, been loved.

In “Provide, Provide,” Mueenuddin illustrates the primordial impulses evoked by the possibility of dying without this connection. As Frost writes in the poem from which the title of the story is taken:

Too many fall from great and good
 For you to doubt the likelihood...
 Better to go down dignified
 With boughten friendship at your side
 Than none at all. Provide, provide! (ll. 5-6, 19-21)

For Jaglani, this affair is an effort by him to have one meaningful relationship in his life, while for Zainab, it is the only means to have a child. It is a cruel fact of Mueenuddin’s bibliocosm that this “boughten friendship” amounts to nothing for both of them—Jaglani realizes that his affair has been a mistake, and Zainab is left without her adopted child.

Mueenuddin’s reach and expanse within his limited frame is extraordinary. His sweeping gaze conjures up a remarkably unsentimental vision of the poorest underclass (“Nawabdin Electrician,” “A Spoiled Man,” “Saleema”), the rich upper class still adapting to a new world that has no place for a feudalistic lifestyle (“In Other Rooms, Other Wonders,” “Lily,” “Our Lady of Paris”), and those in between (“Provide, Provide,” “About a Burning Girl”). He is equally at ease describing the newly emerging narcissistic self-importance of a man who has just survived a

deadly assault or the inevitable destruction of a poor maid who has been too free with her favors as he is while giving the reader in a few deft strokes, the portrait of a typical upper-class woman from the feudal aristocracy: “She had been a famous beauty, from a prominent, cultured Lucknow family. Now at forty-five she knew everyone of a certain class in Karachi, went to dinners and to the polo and to all the fashionable weddings, flew often to Lahore and Islamabad, and summered in London” (144). It is precisely because of this range that the focus on the universality of human experience and the need to connect is given a new dimension.

In “Lily” and in “Our Lady of Paris”, the characters recite James Merrill from memory, repeat famous adages attributed to Louis XV in original French in regular conversation, elegantly talk about popular films made on Graham Greene’s novels and show off their collection of antique art and impeccable fashion instinct to impress and put one over another, but the glitter and the sheen does not disguise the fact that these lives are as broken and laced with human desires, fears and sorrows as that of their less-fortunate counterparts. In a much-anticipated juxtaposition of the center and the periphery, we see the rich bride-to-be suddenly come across her absolutely disenfranchised neighbors: “Hanging there at the far end, disembodied faces rippled behind the plastic, three, four, five of them, fixed on her, distorted, larger and then smaller as the breeze shook the tent... These must be from the slum, the people who lived illegally on the banks of an open sewage channel that drained this millionaires’ district” (198). In stark contrast to the bride’s bejewelled attire, these faces appear “disembodied,” denied their full humanity in this spectral synecdochic presence.

Explaining in a blog interview why he chose to write interconnected stories or a short story cycle, Mueenuddin observes that “most good collections tell a larger story, the story of the whole”(“The Elegant Variation”). To read this pursuit of a larger story that defines the creative impetus behind this collection as an essentialist quest to tease out the general characteristics of a whole nation would be too myopic. Mueenuddin’s ‘larger story’ is conceived in terms of the human, not the national, and should be read accordingly.

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