

## Rhizomatic Literaties: Stories from Pakistan, Vol. 1

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Sajid, Anam. *Rhizomatic Literaties*. Edited by Fuzeela Zubair and Wajeeha Jamil, vol. 1, Daastan Publications, 2019. 51 pages.

Pakistani bibliophiles, literary critics, academics, and readers often bemoan the public's declining interest in reading. According to widely circulated surveys in 2019, "75% Pakistanis do not read any books," (1) while only "7% are avid readers" (2). In these glum readerly conditions, an initiative like Rhizomatic Literaties is a worth enterprise.

Rhizomatic Literaties is an initiative by Anam Sajid, with the editorial help of Fuzeela Zubair and Wajeeha Jamil. With all its Deleuzian resonance, the short story collection aims at celebrating "amateur literary diversity" (5). The first volume of Rhizomatic Literaties contains:

twelve short stories ranging from various genres that defy the conventional narrative that has become the norm in Pakistan – from mermaid infested shoes of Karachi, to finding faith in the most unlikely of places, a dystopia inspired by George Orwell and Plato, the story of a mother and son in the postcolonial era, a contemporary that highlights disabilities, a lonely vampire haunting the *qurbani* grounds of Islamabad and so much more.

If you are as easily intrigued by any Deleuzian reference as I do, then this reads like a perfect treat. It sets the expectations for experimental, speculative, postmodern fictional narratives, with which even the established Anglophone writers have not fully engaged yet. The advanced readers' copy includes five stories. The first story in "narratives of change" of *Rhizomatic Literaties* (5), is *To Be Happy* by Maania. On the risk of didacticism, the story dialogically narrativizes the importance of contentment and happiness. Jumaina, a college-going young woman, is unhappy about not having a car to travel to her college; while Dawud, a young man with a hearing disability, is bothered by Jumaina's frowned face. The story is simple, easily graspable, and encourages the reader to find joy in small things in life.

Second story, *Voices*, with an unnamed writer, is about an escort, Tabeer, and her daughter, Kirrat. It centers around the monetary pressures, and sociocultural consequences of choosing prostitution as a profession. *Voices* invokes empathy and kindness in friendships and human connections. But because of the frequent recurrence of similar themes about prostitution and socio-cultural price of that in Urdu and Pakistani Anglophone literature, the reader might have a reading *deja vu*. Neither of these stories stick to the introductory statement of experimental and rhizomatic literary standard.

Third story, *THE DIARY*, by Mominah Faisal, is set in post-partition and postcolonial Indian sub-continent. It narrates a mother's troubles during the partition and post-partition migration. The story resonates some elements of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The plot is more nuanced than *To Be Happy* and *Voices*. The last story in this advanced readers' copy is *BODY AND SOUL BLOOD* by Sammanah A. Mughal. The story explores nostalgia, memories, religious rituals, and personal identities. The plot is smoother, the characters are somewhat more developed, and language has a poetic flow to it. It, somewhat, lives up to the rhizomatic claims of *Rhizomatic Literacies*. *Sea Skin* by Fuzeela Zubair is another well-weaved story that explores ontological, romantic and familial tensions – with Ilyaas, a sea-diver who falls in love with a mermaid. After hopelessly trying to find his oceanic Layla, Ilyaas walks in the ocean to never emerge from it.

Though none of the stories are thematically or linguistically experimental, speculative, or non-traditional, they engage with diverse forms of imaginative characters like mermaids and vampires which happen to inhabit the imaginaries of young kids. I, as a subjective reader, find the opening stories rather simple – but the latter stories in the collection have more dynamic and round characters and engage with more complex plots. The selection involves some typos and grammatical mistakes, but that is the norm for advanced readers copies. These short stories may slightly divert from initial claims of “defy[ing] the conventional narrative that has become the norm in Pakistan,” but they encourage young, amateur fiction writers, which in itself is a commendable task. Hopefully, *Rhizomatic Literacies* would present the readers with more experimental and genre-defying and tradition-challenging stories in their upcoming volumes.

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[1] “75% Pakistanis Do Not Read Books: Poll.” *Pakistan Today*, INP, 18 Apr. 2019. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/04/18/lahore-according-to-a-recent-survey-carried-out-by-gallup-and-gilani-pakistan-3-in-4-pakistanis-75->

[claim-not-to-read-any-books-at-all-only-9-are-avid-readers-a-nationally-representative-sample/](#)

[2] Ali, Mansoor. “3 Out Of 4 Students In Pakistan Never Read A Book Other Than University Course. Only 9 Percent Are Avid Readers.” *Naya Daur*, 21 Apr. 2019. <https://nayadaur.tv/2019/04/3-our-of-4-students-in-pakistan-never-read-a-book-other-than-university-course-only-9-percent-are-avid-readers/>