
THE MOON IN THE WATER

John Stifler

Ameena Hussein, *The Moon in the Water*, Perera Hussein Publishing House, 2009, Rs. 750, in all bookshops.

For a moment, judge this book by its cover. Whatever model posed for the photo, her navel is too perfectly placed, and the fabric of her belly-dancing costume too perfectly bright pink, to ignore when displayed on a bookshop table.

Most intriguing about the anonymous figure on the cover of *The Moon in the Water*, however, is that the protagonist of Ameena Hussein's first novel is a Muslim woman, but not at all an inhabitant of either the cultural traditions or the classic physical sensuality implied by the illustration. Rather, she is an American-educated Sri Lankan who, at the beginning of the story, lives in Switzerland with her African boyfriend and favors T-shirts and jeans over saris, veils, dancing skirts or the social norms that go with them.

The novel, however, takes place mostly in Sri Lanka, and, given its European opening, it is inevitably a story of homecoming and discoveries (mostly disturbing) about the main character's family. That theme itself is ancient, but the predicaments and at least two of the people in this story are engaging enough to keep the pages turning quickly. More, the book is a sweet, poignant portrait of the country—not vastly comprehensive, as some larger works in both Sri Lanka and India have tried to be, but carefully specific on a small, fine scale, with its constant focus on how a terrorist bomb, a switching of bridegrooms within an arranged family marriage, an old tea plantation and the 2004 tsunami all swirl around the life of one young woman whose father has been blown up and who discovers only after his death that she herself was an adopted child.

Khadeeja, the protagonist, interrupts a romantic sojourn in Spain to fly home when her father dies in an explosion that was intended to kill soldiers in Colombo. She spends part of the story watching her mother — once a feisty, progressive young woman herself—fight against standard expectations of how a widow grieves, and part of it breaking away from the family in order to slip off to an old tea plantation when she discovers her particular role in the family secret.

Enter the other best character in the story, Arjuna, who turns out to be the other half of that secret. Khadeeja sneaks up on her new-found brother under false pretenses, invades his space, and renders him immensely angry when he discovers who she is and how she has concealed the fact. Then, by and by, they form a new alliance in which they further sort out how their respective adoptive families have raised them and tried unsuccessfully to protect them from the poignant truth of their shared parentage.

This story is richly populated with supporting characters: the tongueless servant who tried to stand up to the JVP; the imam who suffered horribly in a seminary in Pakistan, then shrugged off his personal traumas to minister to the poor about him at home; Khadeeja's adoptive sister and brothers, with their memories of childhood and their conflicts about their father's will; Khadeeja's upstanding, warm erstwhile fiancé. The list goes on.

At least one reader in my hearing has complained that the large number of characters and locations and plot events in *The Moon in the Water* is a flaw in the book. That particular criticism applies to many first novels, whose authors seem to overflow with things to say, bringing them in from all directions, piling them on, and scattering the intensity of what could otherwise be a deeper story. In this regard, Ms. Hussein has certainly touched lightly — or, one might better say, delicately — on many experiences, any one of which might deserve more depth of treatment. A different novel could have focused, for example, entirely on Khadeeja's mother's ambivalent position between being married to her cousin (traditional) who has rejected the marriage originally planned for him (less traditional) and being more distressed by the mourning ritual than by the death itself (not traditional). Or on the latent ambiguous sexual attraction between siblings. Or on being torn between independence and family.

Then, too, the elements of this plot seem to surprise the characters more than they surprise the reader. Yes, discovering that one is adopted is often traumatic — but the experience is widespread and well known nowadays. Yes, if you're on a beach when a tsunami hits, your chances of survival are small. Yes, it's strange to meet a relative one

did now know one had. And yes, yes, yes. Few generations in Sri Lanka have grown up in times of terrible uncertainty and political danger. (But yes, too, that theme is urgent and likely to remain so, given its recurrence in any number of contemporary Sri Lankan writings of every genre.)

On the other hand, what gives shape and strength to *The Moon in the Water* is precisely Hussein's ability to interweave these and other themes into a tight latticework of a plot. Her technical execution is still developing, and in places she explains more than she needs to, noting in the narration what is already clear from her concrete description or her characters' own words. In this regard, she shares a quality of redundancy that continues to mark much contemporary Sri Lankan prose, both fiction and non-fiction.

Yet nothing seems to have been thrown into the mix gratuitously, and nothing seems to have been inserted out of self-indulgence. A few moments could be stand-alone pieces – Khadeeja's memory of climbing the lighthouse at Galle Face in the days before security patrols is one example – but Ms. Hussein ties them snugly into the larger story, the deeper exchanges between Khadeeja and Arjuna. We see each of these two people separately, often, but one of the best things about the book is the scenes they share. Indeed they do not know each other well, having only just met, yet their affinity is immediate and natural, and their crisscrossing lives are the backbone of the novel.

Hussein's plotting is sure-handed and well paced, with elegant, subtle shifts of point of view. A particular example: Sitting on Galle Face Green, Arjuna talks to Khadeeja about the political violence of 1989. His narrative is conversational, with pauses where he struggles to remember a detail precisely, but then he recalls a threatening letter that circulated at the hand of a patriotic Sinhala youth front. His recollection comes in the form of the entire letter verbatim, in italics on the book's page, rather than pieced together from memory as he talks. The point of view shifts from Arjuna's face and voice to the awful words as if on a separate sheet of paper, cinematically taking up the whole screen.

Note: Western and subcontinental audiences alike will sooner or later find themselves watching a good Sri Lankan story turned into a film. ("Elephant Walk" in the 1950s was entertaining, but it doesn't count.) If *The Moon in the Water* becomes such a piece, its delicate and revelatory

quality should put it in the category occupied by Mira Nair's adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Namesake" – and not at all in the slick Hollywood/Bollywood style of "Slumdog Millionaire."

It must be possible to write a good Sri Lankan novel that does not refer to the past three decades of political horrors, but the main characters in *The Moon in the Water* are too socially awake for Ms. Hussein not to have included that enduring, sad, necessary theme. Some conversations – notably one between Arjuna and a young English woman, a volunteer teacher in a village – are indeed recognizable as political musings transferred to fiction, but Hussein makes them natural, not didactic or polemical. Arjuna's reflections on violent elements of recent Sri Lankan history enhance the scope and depth of the novel while keeping it a good story. In a modest way, this quality of the book recalls something of *The Long Day Wakes*, a late-60s novel by Anthony Burgess ("A Clockwork Orange"), set in Malaysia in the last years of British rule there. Burgess's novel is much longer, but, like *The Moon in the Water*, it offers intense romantic relationships, loss, and atmospheric color, combined with many characters whose own stories are told briefly and whose lives illustrate real history.

Near the end of *The Moon in the Water*, the tsunami hits. Hussein's description of the calamity is superbly understated and utterly local – just one spot on the beach at Unawatuna – and it includes three pages of the nervy arrangement of one drowning character's last thoughts into a series of spirals of distorted print. Such visual tricks in writing usually seem like gimmicks, cheap imitations of late 19th century French poets (the cubist poet Guillaume Apollinaire is a prime example), but Hussein gets it exactly right, and the effect is moving.

Having lived in Sri Lanka since December, and feeling what I hope is an understandable measure of self-consciousness combined with fascination for this place, I can see lending *Moon in the Water* to an American who has never been here and saying, "Read this. It will answer many of the questions you ask me about what Sri Lanka is like." At the same time, Amreena Hussein's novel is not at all a sociological study but rather, most gratifyingly, a piece of contemporary craft and art, sketching in clean, distinct lines some moments of life that lie beyond either politics or passion. The effect is deeply beautiful. ■

A Sri Lankan Postmodernist's Perspective on English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka