

Rajat Chaudhuri (Ed.) and Zafar Anjum (Series Ed.), *The Best Asian Speculative Fiction 2018*. Singapore, Kitaab, 2018. xx + 472 pp. ISBN 9789811185281.

Reviewed by Agnes S. K. Yeow

Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Anthologies of Asian speculative fiction are relatively few and far between and when one does get published, it marks a significant milestone in the genre itself. In addition, writers, editors and commentators tacitly recognize the importance of underscoring the source of and inspiration for such works, namely Asia. This, in turn, immediately prompts some questioning. Apart from its cultural and geographical setting, what distinguishes Asian speculative fiction from the rest? How different are the works – in terms of themes, style, tropes, idiom – compared with those from Europe or Africa or any other continent? Why Asian? Why now? Is there a tradition of speculative storytelling in Asia? What counts as speculative fiction in the Asian context?

These questions demand theoretical and critical responses, and this collection of speculative tales – with its bold claim of being the best Asian speculative fiction for 2018 – presents a singular opportunity for both the casual reader and the academic scholar to begin scrutinizing the text and, more importantly, enjoying the sheer diversity of voices and imaginings emanating from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and East Asia as well as the Asian diasporas. Both established and emerging writers – regardless of whether they identify with the genre – are represented in this carefully curated collection, and almost all the works were written specially for the volume. The result is a collection that encompasses a wide repertoire of voices and tales and which is potentially at the cutting edge of the genre.

In his helpful introduction to the volume, editor Rajat Chaudhuri describes speculative fiction as an “adorable, shape-shifting, slippery creature” (xiv), and true to this broad and inclusive characterization, this collection does not disappoint with its selection of science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopia and the various offshoots and permutations of these forms. It is apparent that beyond the term’s provenance – associated with and manifested in the works of Robert Heinlein and Margaret Atwood, that is, speculative seen in terms of ‘what-if’ hypothetical situations and of what could happen in the future based on the technology that already exists – ‘speculative’ has become a catch-all term for works which challenge or extend our notions of reality and truth. Whatever the case, in putting the volume together, the editors were guided by both the conventional definitions and the newer, evolving understandings of the term. The volume has its finger on the pulse of speculative writing as manifested in stories with titles like “Web,” “The Daughter That Bleeds,” “Falling Through the Labyrinth,”

“How the Human ATM Lived Forever,” “The Collision of Parallels” and “Dante and the Tumult Cards.” More importantly, though, a major motivation for the book’s editors is the desire to provide a platform for Asian voices who are underrepresented; as the editors point out, speculative fiction with its pliable and porous boundaries is exceptionally well-positioned to include the works of ‘others’ who speak their own speculative language.

As far as themes go, as with all literature, these works of Asian speculative fiction are concerned with the human condition and its perennial issues; nevertheless, they do so by underscoring the posthuman and postnatural condition and its implications for human and more-than-human – including supernatural – entities. As such, the stories are complex juxtapositions of familiar and unfamiliar elements: love, loss, guilt, identity, cyborgs, bio-power, alien life-forms, time and space travel, post-apocalypse, social decay, artificial intelligence, the afterlife, hubris, ageing, gender, sexuality, parallel universes, ghosts and the spirit-world, among others. Moreover, literary history shows that narratives are often shaped by crisis and historical circumstances. Arguably, speculative fiction in general is itself a literature of crisis engaging with and reacting to environmental catastrophe, scientific and technological ascendancy, postmodern thought, spiritual apathy, political oppression and injustices of various kinds.

The first story in the collection, “Web,” by Eliza Victoria from the Philippines, is a riveting commentary on our obsession with medical panaceas and physical healing. Members of the community are divided into Arachne wearers and non-wearers. The Arachne is an alien lifeform that originates from an asteroid and which can heal human injuries. Unfortunately, it turns out that the extraterrestrial creatures have a dark side, namely, the capacity and will to spread hate and fear among wearers and to ultimately destroy their human hosts. Significantly, prejudice, constituted of hatred and fear, is something the main characters – lesbian lovers struggling to find acceptance in society – know all too well. In “The Daughter That Bleeds,” a story by Indian author Shweta Taneja, bleeders refer to fertile women who are auctioned in a marketplace in a time when fertility has become very rare. This disturbing, dystopian tale highlights the commodification of women’s bodies – echoing Atwood – as fertility is the only ticket out of abject poverty. Unfortunately, these fertile women, although highly valued, are the victims of a cold, exploitative and dehumanizing system. Malaysian writer Sharmilla Ganesan’s ominously-titled story “Last Shot” is set in a city – futurist Kuala Lumpur – where people travel in taxis operated by taxibots and have telecommunication devices implanted in their ears. A well-known landmark, the Lake Gardens, is enclosed in a dome to shut out the haze: a pointed reference to the actual recurring haze that blankets swathes of Southeast Asia due to human activities. Against this backdrop of a toxic social and environmental landscape, the latest trend in society is to have memory portraits taken of the elderly – debilitated, unresponsive selves – using the old-fashioned DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera instead of a point-and-shoot digital camera or smartphone.

The protagonist is a photographer who rides the current, nostalgic wave of visual culture, but when she is coerced into taking a portrait of her own grandfather by an obnoxious, overbearing uncle, her rage at “the pretense, the artifice, the ridiculous gloating of clients over the pictures of [her] helpless subjects” (246) becomes too much to bear and leads to an unexpected, painful climax. In this story, the personal, angst-filled journey of the individual intersects with a future world that can only be described as hollow and artificial.

These and other stories make this collection – with its array of provocative, prophetic Asian voices – an important contribution to an ever-expanding and dynamic literary form. The book’s focus on alternative or counter realities and fantastical worlds as a vehicle for interrogating issues that affect our existence as a species reinforces speculative fiction’s role as a critical and effective barometer of the state of the world we live in today.