

Dipika Mukherjee, *Thunder Demons*. New Delhi: Gyaana Books, 2011. 270 pp. ISBN 978-81-909391-6-4.

There is a point in a book which turns it into a personal reading experience. A particularly memorable character can evoke it, or it can be triggered by a sudden or quirky turn of narrative. In the *Thunder Demons*, it is not just because Abhik makes his very first appearance like a tall, dark, handsome Greek god straight out of the bathroom, but that, to this reader, something in his noble idealism reminds of Sydney Carton in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Abhik is an idealistic lawyer, representing the underprivileged, the minorities, in a Malaysia where there is always one group that wants to be more favoured than others. He is also the only scion of one of the few Bengali families who settled in Malaysia in the 1940s – a time of change, confusion and chaos.

Thunder Demons is not actually another work in Indian diasporic fiction, though it is that and a lot more. It begins with a diabolical killing, and one thinks here is a crime novel (admittedly, one of the functions of the reviewer is to determine a novel's narrative genre). Colonel S appears in the book and remains throughout a bit of a shadowy and mysterious figure, with a strange power over Jay Ghosh, fixing a necklace bomb onto a Tibetan woman in a lonely deserted road in Malaysia, even as a princeling looks on. But a modern day thriller turns only a few pages later into a book that raises questions on that most idiosyncratic aspect of one's being – identity; who one is and the need to belong.

This is a motif that unfolds in various ways, making up all the deeper layers of this intricate novel; a motif also whose most eloquent symbol is Agni, a woman who is managing the security systems at the airport. She knows her mother, Shanti, only from the stories she has heard of her. Moreover, she has only a vague sense of who her father could be, and who lives in Malaysia, a country which to her is the very apparent amalgam of all things Asian, and yet where purity somehow matters considerably. To complete her personal life, Agni is also a woman with a "commitment phobia," unable to say yes to the man who loves her.

If identity is partly answered by where a person wants to belong, it is perhaps evoked in the novel by the decision the scientist Jay Ghosh makes when he is lured back to Malaysia by his mentor and saviour, Colonel S. Jay has a fondness for the apt alliterative that can be irritatingly irksome. Besides, he wants to get away from a woman who cannot quite get the exile out of her, even if the condition of being exiled is all she writes about.

There is Shapna, Greg, Colonel S and a whole host of fascinating characters in the novel. Some of them also make up quite another kind of exiles, those who want to make a new home for themselves and yet in the Malaysia of the present that does not seem possible. Still in its history, even the parts shaded over, there is evidence of how much it was a land that saw movement and constant intermingling of people. Arabs, traders from India, the British, the Chinese and myriad others left their mark on the land, its culture and the people. But as boundaries simultaneously are being created, identities too matter, and this story stands at the intermeshes and crossroads of individual lives where wider, more complex borders mingle, break away, etch themselves out, and appear superficially porous. A story best illustrated by the Bengalis in Malaysia, the story of three families in particular, and it is their confusions, hidden struggles and complicated, interrelated pasts that make up this novel, and so the name seems apt: *Thunder Demons* – the old demons of myth that appeared when rain lashed earth and left behind its imprints on stone

There is Nikhil Babu and his wife Shapna, Mahesh and Ila, Mridula and Ranjan. Three families that see sins committed after a tragedy happens, and always in the most innocuous ways, except that these impact lives and futures irrevocably. These families harbour a secret about Agni's parentage, a secret that Jay has the answer to, and whose knowledge Agni thinks will complete her story when he writes to her out of the blue, and then equally suddenly returns to Malaysia.

It is interesting how Agni resolves this question, her own identity, as the unconscious, and at times even unacknowledged, subliminal demand every person has to belong. It is there in how convincingly she follows traditions as on the occasion of Deepavali at "Pujobari," how "naturally" it comes to her. The old customs that envelop her like a comfortable old coat.

Perhaps, the author suggests that identity is something we realise at moments of epiphany. And this comes to Agni not when she confronts what she has lost forever, but in the way in a faraway land, Agni remembers the colour of turmeric. She strains to scrub it out. She looks for the familiar yellow in cooked food in a new country and does not find herself in a fulfilling relationship with Greg. Is the presence of the ever absent familiar which makes her realise that it is the present that may be truly unfamiliar? This is where some of the memorable lines in *Thunder Demons* appear:

She cooked through her homesickness, conjuring up what she had left behind by being able to close her eyes and smell and taste. Her favourite dishes out of her grandmother's Malaysian kitchen all had the yellow taste melded into the flavour. As she made those dishes in her Texan kitchen, Agni would relentlessly cover her tracks, mopping up the obstinate yellow splatters before they became part of the spotless laminates. She scrubbed with abrasives, detergents, and bleach, yet the yellow stains on the tabletop,

the blender, the kitchen towel, the microwave oven and her nails – all of it would be a fresh reproach when the sunshine poured in every morning. A gaudy colour, so out of place. (138-39)

A paragraph that while innocuous (even Agni finds the way she sounds “superficial”), is telling in its subtle revelations. The colour of a familiar spice that she knows comes to her from a kitchen where foods cooked were themselves a product of the very amalgam that Agni is. The realisation of who one is can come in elusive ways, but its effects remain equally lasting.

Anu Kumar, Singapore