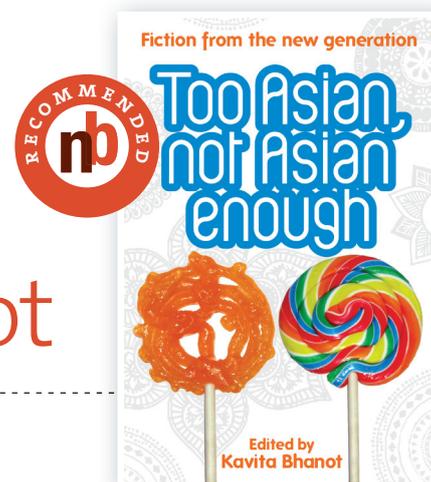


Too Asian, Not Asian Enough

Edited by Kavita Bhanot



‘Born or brought up in Britain, we suffer at the hands of oppressive parents. These comical or villainous figures hold us back from the pleasures of Western life...’ This perspective has become a cliché dominating British Asian narratives, argues editor Kavita Bhanot. It has become a marketable formula, stifling to a new generation of writers who don’t want to conform to its conventions. The contributors submitting their stories knew they would not be told they were ‘Too Asian, or not Asian enough’. From this freedom comes a startlingly diverse and original range of stories: an anthology of twenty-one stories funny, shocking, moving, and thought-provoking.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

KAVITA JINDAL

DAY 7

of my new existence. I have a plan to make it bearable, and this evening my little project has worked perfectly again. If I can go on a detour three or four times a week without my hosts suspecting anything then there will be delight in the world, harmony in the star charts, new hives for bees and funding for the Arts. Et cetera.

I am already in the bedroom, changing out of my work shirt and into a T-shirt, when I hear them come in. My office shoes are in the hall, but a female voice floats upstairs anyway: ‘Mee-heer, are you home?’

‘I’m home,’ I call back. Not that this is my home; it’s hers and she’s letting me stay as a house guest until I find a flat to rent. I’ve been here a week. It feels like seven years.

‘I’ll get some dinner going,’ she calls. I hear her say something to Atul that I can’t catch.

I must go down to pretend to help. But I’m bushed. I’ll lie down for just two minutes. Just. Two. Minutes. The bulb shines its yellow light into my eyes. The bulb is shaded by one of those round paper contraptions that were sold everywhere – Ikea, Habitat, John Lewis – in the last decade. Cara, whom

I am learning to refer to as ‘my estranged wife’, with the emphasis on *strange*, would never countenance such a lampshade. This particular once-white paper orb is covered in a thin film of dust. Cara would rip the thing down.

Has she arrived home yet? Has she found the open pizza box on the tiled path to our front door? Currently *her* front door. I have been manipulated into exile or ‘am trying a new way of habiting’, depending on whose viewpoint you want. It’s a pepperoni pizza. The red of the pepperoni amid the yellow splodge of cheese picking up on the dark red tiles of the path. There’s artistic vision in my plan.

Outside the window, the cloudy sky has darkened further into the smudged blue-black of Pantone 433C. If Cara isn’t home yet, then she’s likely to surprise a fox eating the pizza when she does get back.

I hope you make a real mess, fox; smear the pizza on the path, you diseased little fox. Cara might come home tired, but she’ll bring out the mop to wipe off the goo. She might even have to slish a bucket of hot water to get rid of the smell and get the tiles looking clean.

‘Mee-heer.’ What is it with the woman below?



Why can't she pronounce my name properly? Mihir. Soft *i*, soft *i*. Mihir. Not Mee-heer. A bit much when I can pronounce her name correctly. First vowel, barely enunciated; second vowel, long *e*, as in eek.

'Yes, Denise?'

'Dinner's ready.'

We sit at Denise's kitchen table, Atul, Denise and I. Looking at my hostess, who has kind eyes but frumpy shoulder-length hair, I'm reminded of what Cara once said about her: 'You can tell she's not a creative person.'

'How?'

'There's no spark of it, no flash in the clothes she wears or the furnishings in her house. So, well, if she is imaginative, it's well-hidden.'

'She could *do* inspired things rather than just look artistic.'

'But we know her. She doesn't *do* creative.' Cara had shrugged. 'It doesn't mean anything. Denise is one of the most likeable and dependable people I know. That's what's great about her.'

I pile a mound of dependable Denise's penne with sundried tomatoes and tinned tuna on to my plate.

'I steamed some broccoli for you, Attle,' she says, too sweetly, pushing a plate of the greens towards him.

Okay, she can't pronounce her own husband's name. Why haven't I noticed this before? But then we've never spent a week living under the same roof. For me, it is already too long. And who knows? Possibly for them, too. It's not like Cara and I are known for our easy-going qualities. But Atul was so welcoming when I arrived, and he and Denise are making a real effort to coddle me. Atul is my best mate, after all. Even so, he'd looked shocked to see me wiping down the skirting boards on the staircase on my second day as house guest; a Sunday, incidentally.

'What are you doing?' he'd gasped. I'd tried to explain. Cara couldn't bear dust gathering in crevices. Because of Cara, because of having lived with her for far too long, although less than seven real years, I was programmed to clean when I saw grimy skirting boards. It was Cara's fault.

'But I'll stop now,' I'd said. Then I waited for them to take themselves off to their bedroom for weekend conjugal relations before I surreptitiously crept out to finish the job. I'd already cleaned the skirting boards in my room and the tiny guest shower room. For the grooves I'd used a toothbrush, the one Denise had given me on the first night, when I'd arrived after phoning Atul to ask if I could stay a few days. As if I'd storm out of my house without my own toothbrush.

I'd hit on the pizza plan on Tuesday. All day at work, instead of coming up with a new design for the lettering on Stavio's fat new highlighter pens, I wondered how to get at Cara. Driving back to Atul's place in Balham instead of my own quiet road in Putney I'd been overtaken by a pizza delivery idiot skittering his purple moped along the road. He almost crashed into a traffic island before wobbling right in front of my car, forcing me to choose between

"Okay, she can't pronounce her own husband's name. Why haven't I noticed this before? But then we've never spent a week living under the same roof."

braking hard (not good for the car), or killing him. I raised two fingers at him. He raised four back. But the moron had given me an idea. I U-turned then and there, paid out five pounds for a foul takeaway pizza, drove home, to *my* home, and threw the open box on the path, letting the pizza slither out. Greetings, Cara.

DAY 13

I think the plan is working well. I have mashed pizza on the path a total of six times. I have thought about hanging around to see her reaction, but it would be too risky. I would love to see her scrubbing those tiles. It is exactly the sort of minor annoyance that will drive her *up the wall*. I know the mess is being cleaned up, but I want to know for sure that she is getting as worked up as I expect her to. But then I wonder, what if I spy on her and see that she's ignoring that evening's pizza slop; that she's sitting on the sofa instead, feet encased in her knitted bootees, legs up on the stool, watching *Miss Marple* with a glass of chilled white wine in her hand. (I can't stand white wine.) But, of course, I wouldn't be able to look in anyway, because Cara always closes the curtains before she sits down to watch TV. And what excuse would I give Atul and Denise? Going out is fine, they are gagging for me to go out, but presumably I should have a plausible story. If I was sighted hanging about my own home by a passing busybody, they might mention it to Cara, who would then put two and two together. As it is, I stop by in haste now, parking a few doors down and donning a cycle helmet and bulky yellow jacket, so that even if neighbours happen to be looking out, they won't really be able to tell who it is in the early evening darkness.

Happily, at dinner tonight (farfalle with asparagus and olives), I get confirmation that all is not well in Cara-land. Denise starts to speak in a confidential, soothing voice. 'I spoke to Cara today.' She waits for a reaction. I give her none. Atul glances at me and I look blankly back to show it's cool with me.

'What does Cara have to say?' Atul asks his wife in a non-committal tone. Translation, which we can all hear loud and clear: Hey, babe, go easy; don't upset my friend or by extension, me.

'Cara's a bit distressed, but I mean, not about this' – Denise waves her hand apologetically around the table – 'but something else entirely.' She widens

her hazel eyes. 'She's being picked on by some local teenage gang.'

I feel a twinge of worry for Cara, but it subsides. Denise looks at me as if I should be rushing to Cara's aid. But I am living here now, Denise, see? I'm not Cara's minder.

'What gang?' Atul asks. 'Why?'

Denise carries on with her story in a calming, I-was-made-for-counselling voice. 'Apparently, a couple of weeks ago, she reprimanded these three youths who were standing on the pavement just outside her house throwing beer bottles at passing cars. She told them to stop. "Yeah, what's it to you?" one of them sneered. "It's not right," she told them. "Don't do it." And then she backed down a bit and said, "Don't do it standing here, anyway. Go elsewhere for your fun game." They left, but they made a throat-cutting gesture at her as they did so.'

I'd heard this story from Cara on the day it happened. I'd told her to call the police if she wanted; she'd grunted as if that was a useless suggestion. That was the week every conversation was actually a quarrel. No matter what I said, I got a snort in reply. It went on all week, until late on Friday night I packed my bag. 'I'm taking the car,' is all I said by way of goodbye. She'd grunted.

Denise continues with her account. 'She thinks they're targeting her now. She said that for the past three days *in a row* they've left a stinking half-eaten pizza on her front path.'

Atul frowns in extreme puzzlement, so I copy his expression. 'Is she sure it's the kids?' he asks, finally. 'A gang is wasting eight quid a night on terrorizing her with *pizza*?'

Not eight, five pounds, I want to say. Not fancy pizza, Atul. These low-grade ones cost under a fiver. I keep my lips sealed, even press them inwards in sympathy at this outrage to my ex-front-path.

'Well, she's not completely sure, but she guesses it's those local youths she had an altercation with. Attle, that's why I've offered your services.'

'What?' Attle is definitely startled.

'Well, you know, since we're friends with both of them' – she nods towards me – 'we must treat them fairly. With equal support. I'm sure Mee-heer will agree.'

Mee-heer won't, but no one is asking Mee-heer really.

Denise is using the counselling tone again. 'He is staying here, so I thought we should offer Cara our support, too. It's a difficult time for everybody.'

Not least for you, I think. I have been your uppity guest for almost a fortnight.

'What kind of help have you offered Cara?' Atul asks, sounding a bit desperate.

'Well, I said that you could stake out their home, just for a couple of evenings. If you parked there, say from four onwards until Cara got back, you would see who's leaving the pizza. You'll have a description. You might even be able to get a photo.'

'Jesus, Denise, I'm busy. I don't have time to sit around in cars, waiting for loons to show up.'

'Just a couple of days. Not tomorrow, obviously, it's too short notice.'

But you could arrange it. At least once next week. On Monday or Tuesday?'

'Jesus, Izzy. Hire a PI.'

When she doesn't respond, he says, 'You do it.'

He gets a look. You know, the wifey look. The one that brooks no argument.

He glares at me. What did I do? Then Denise turns to me, too.

'Unless you want to help, Mee-heer. Although' – she delicately wrinkles just the top of her nose – 'Cara did say she wanted to have nothing to do with...'

'Ya, ya, I'll go one afternoon next week,' Atul interjects quickly.

I take the dishes to the dishwasher and stack them on the counter. Denise stands there like she's waiting for me to do something. She's looking at me with a schoolteacher's stare when you haven't quite finished a task. She *is* a schoolteacher, so this must be the look her pupils receive – strict but kindly, hint of twinkle, hint of steel. I get it. I'm meant to put the dishes in the dishwasher. Cara could never tolerate a stranger – well, a newbie – in the house filling the dishwasher. There are only certain ways the bowls are allowed to go in. And the large plates are always on the left; the small ones on the right. Two spoons of the same size do not sit together. They never get properly clean if you do that. Wooden-handled knives *never* go in. But the inside of Denise's dishwasher is haphazard. As I rearrange the breakfast dishes so that I can stack the dinner plates the right way, I think about Atul staking out my home, or Cara's home as it is now, next week. That's Plan One brought to an effing halt.

I slide in the dishwasher racks and close the door. What I can do is finish Plan One on a high. A proper blast. Five pizzas, why not? Three squished into the path for smelly gloop on Cara's heels; two upturned to show their colours when she switches the porch light on.

DAY 24

as house guest. Dinner is a stilted affair. Atul and Denise are fidgety, their eyes skating over me, but also not quite meeting each other's. I wonder if they know about the five pizzas. Do they want to accuse me, but can't bring themselves to, despite instinctively grasping the truth?

Denise fairly chucks dishes onto the table. I wheeze in surprise. It's not pasta! We've got brown rice and chicken breasts and spinach. Denise nudges the plate of spinach over to Atul's elbow. He's been ignoring it studiously, but nudge by nudge it has come closer and is almost being pushed onto his place mat. He gives in; he helps himself to some and then pushes the dish away with a quick roll of his oval eyes. I've already served myself a healthy helping

and as I look down at the wilted spinach on my plate I feel a cramp of sorrow in my stomach. Atul, a samosa-and-parantha man, who believes 'if it ain't fried, it ain't got no taste', is being looked after. These veggies that Denise thrusts on him are a form of love. I swallow and stab my fork into my spinach.

It is up to me to provide some sparkling conversation to lift the mood, but I find I can't. I have spent the last few days gnawing weakly at life, with life gnawing back. I've stayed late in the office, texting Atul to say I'll be home after 10 p.m. I've eaten crisps at my desk. I don't want pubs or people. So the three of us sit quietly; lost in our own worlds, our mouths chewing in unison. After we've cleared up and I've scrubbed the pans to make them look dazzling and new, Atul invites me to sit back down at the table to finish the bottle of wine, it being manic Monday and all. Denise says she'll leave us to it. I sense that they've planned this. She offers me an explanation, saying she wants an early night because she's fasting the next day.

Atul swings round in unfeigned surprise. 'Fasting? For what?'

'Your mother rang to remind me. It's Karva Chauth tomorrow.'

'Already? Again? So soon?'

'Yes.'

'You don't have to fast, Izzy, you can just ignore Mum. I'll tell her you didn't eat until you spotted the risen moon. You stood outside, wearing your wedding bangles, peeping through the strainer, waiting. Ha. As if you'll be able to see the moon through the clouds.'

'Oh no, don't lie to her,' Denise says. 'I don't mind, really.' For the first time this evening she actually looks into his face. 'I quite like the idea: fasting for the wellbeing of my husband.' She is all liquid eyes and tender mouth. Atul puffs out visibly, his chest growing an inch and his neck straightening up.

'Goodnight, Denise,' I say as she wafts upstairs in a warm glow. Atul pours out wine, insisting on fresh glasses. Is he becoming like me? The dishwasher makes its swilling sounds in the background along with an erratic rumble or two. The tension in the room has melted and we sit companionably.

'Mihir, yaar,' Atul asks me softly, 'how's work going?'

'Great. Although I'm not concentrating as much as I should. I'm redesigning the labels for XT shampoo; guess what, instead of cylindrical clutchable bottles we're moving to elongated trapezoid containers. Big deal, huh? Didn't get any sample labels done today, but I'll knock out a couple of ideas tomorrow.'

'Good, good.' He lets me slurp down some more wine. 'And how's the flat-hunting going?'

Atul is such a sweet guy that I know this is the closest he will come to telling me my time is up. I must leave him and Denise in the peace they deserve. I feel sorry for him. But before I speak, he hurries on.

'You know if you want to talk about ... Cara – or what happened, or your ... feelings – you can, I mean, I know how to listen...'

'Thanks, yaar,' I say and feel red wine dripping out of the side of my mouth.

In their guest room I lie back on the small bed and stare up into the deep yellow light of the bulb, which gently illuminates all the dust on the paper shade that surrounds it.

It was kind of Atul to ask. But what can I tell him? Cara, obsessive-compulsive Cara, is bored of marriage. Been there, done that. She wants to live on her own, despite the mad bad youths and the burglars.

I can't tell Atul that this came about after our last trip to India for my sister's wedding. Cara was surrounded by these jumped-up, pumped-up Bombay boys. Maybe she's dallying with one of them.

Maybe all that interest turned her head.

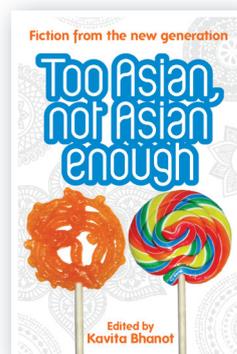
What I do know is that everyone can see I've been wronged, yet it's Cara who steals their sympathy. I will move out from here soon; heck, I'll have chosen a flat by next week. My temporary needs are simple. A one-bedroom place, freshly painted. A window that overlooks a green space: a communal garden or a park or someone else's well-tended garden.

The problem with living alone after so many years of co-habiting is going to be this: who do you blame for what your life has slid into? Who do you blame for the lethargy, for the visits not made, for the sarod that sits reverentially in its own corner not being played? Marriage is an institution that turns you into a round shape sinking into a round hole.

Now that I have to acquire edges, who do I blame if I remain a round peg submerged in a round hole? The world will close up above me, forgetting I am there. I won't remember anyone's birthday and no one will remember mine. The old Mihir I knew has already been rubbed out.

Everything is Cara's fault. I try an experiment to prove my hypothesis. I pull myself up to sitting and I throw my socks, one by one, across the room. I lie back down. I last three seconds before I am compelled to sit up and fetch them. I was always tidy. People occasionally said that I was obsessively tidy, but those people had never met Cara. Once you'd seen Cara's standards, you would know that I was only in the middling league of such behaviour. Of course, despite her hygiene-and-order fixation, or because of it, Cara gets sick all the time. I place my socks on the carpet again, but this time in the spot I have assigned for them, by the roller suitcase I brought with me, and I sink back on the bed, feeling better.

Everything in its place. First, I find the right flat. Second, I think of another way to madden my estranged wife. There is, after all, a purpose to my life. ●



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