

Fragmented Shades Of Love

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LOVE ACROSS A BROKEN MAP: SHORT STORIES FROM THE WHOLE KAHANI

By The Whole Kahani (A British Fiction Writers Collective)
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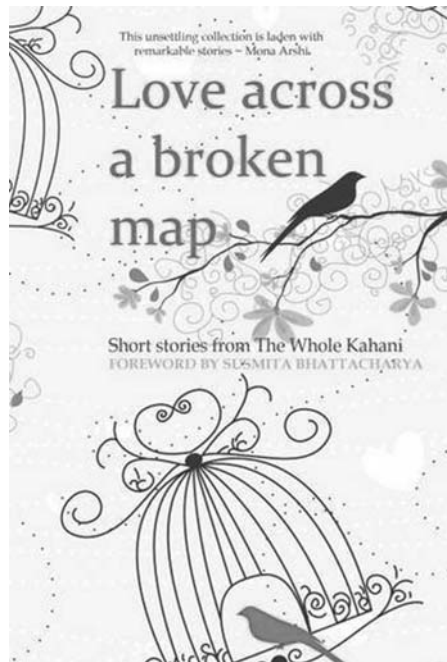
The title is intriguing. *Love Across the Broken Map*, it evokes at once an image of love, pain, walls in between shards created by lovers, people around and well, just by anyone you care to mention. The cover says Short Stories from The Whole Kahani and at once you get the picture. The map may be a broken one but the Kahani is one—it is whole. The artist who is responsible for the cover is not mentioned or if she is, I missed it. The cover too tells you the broken-map-tales of love from one story. There are birds caged and birds free, love does that to all, it frees us and binds us. And knowing that it leaves a burning forehead and a parching tongue, the Lover still leaps in mad pursuit to reach wild ecstasy. So do these lovers on the Broken Map.

Ten stories by ten writers and yet when you read them, you sometimes feel that in the background there is some sameness in tone, almost like the strumming of the tanpura, unchanging and yet lending strength to the soaring and dipping voices. The Foreword by Susmita Bhattacharya tells us of the struggle to put the book down to return to the present and now. Very true.

Is investing in family, love? 'Three Singers' by Kavita A. Jindal tells us it might be. The singers are Himani Charlotte, Sonali Candida and Perry Krishna. 'Often we sing about an ache for a missing lover. I can relate to that, I think. It's not that I'm missing anyone in particular, at this moment, it's more that I'm missing having someone to miss.' And that's quite a sad thing.

We want to have someone to miss, someone to love. We also want to be missed and to be loved. If no one misses us when we are not there? If no one loves us? Farrah Yusuf says in 'By Hand' 'it was not that he died in his home that upset me ... it was the way he died. Alone. No one to miss him, no one to mourn him.'

Love is doing something for another, another that we love. Sacrifices that demand sacrifices, love that cages. No, not quite. Love that makes us willingly wear chains, willingly clip our wings. Will you study in an Art school in London or run a small store near Gateway of India? Khushi makes her choice in 'Entwined Destinies' by Shibani Lal. Khushi—'Hindi for Happiness' 'Isn't



that what Papa really wants for her?'

Love is obsession too. It could be love on the rebound and for a writer whose every word 'is written with a pen dipped in blood.' The discovery that one has found a soul sister can be heady and Reshma Ruia tracks the tale of the soul sisters. The reflection one sees in the mirror may not be that of a soul sister, it may crack from side to side and the curse may come upon the seeker.

'Is there only one type of love? 'Asks Matrika in 'The Nine headed Ravan' by Radhika Kapur. I thought then that was because in English we have only one word for love while in Tamizh we can slot the kind of love by the word we use. Do we want to be slotted? Not Matrika, the daughter of the artist who drew only nine heads for Ravana because she did not plan the space for the tenth head. 'Free from rules', it could be love that lies 'in between the folds of a friendship.'

'Peony has whiskers ... and I am in love', begins C.G. Menon's 'Watermelon Seeds'. This is Anjali who has 'such a Tamil smell' according to Peony's mother Mrs. Wong. The friends play Anjali the Mole and Peony the Ratty, they get their homework wrong and teach each other the bad words in their language. One holiday Anjali goes to India

with her parents when her father slips into a 'different Appa on the way'. There she meets many 'Tamil smell' uncles, sees jack fruit blossoms and watches grandparents safe in mosquito netted dreams. Back at school, things change for the Mole and the Ratty.

Rocky Romeo is of course just that, a rocky Romeo. 'Alone, lone, wolf'. Rocky became his own cliché'. But he is also actually Kabir. Kabir who has been hiding, ignored asleep, who is not the malevolent parasite that Rocky is forced to be. Kabir has now come back alive because of Sitara who is invisible. In this story Dimmi Khan tells us that love is afraid of rejection and at its best it is most vulnerable. 'How could anybody love this?'

Love clings to hope and makes compromises. Rupindar is informed by her GP, Dr. Patel, that Kevin is the match for her. The good doctor 'it seemed was driven by a secret calling higher than his Hippocratic oath; to bring disparate souls together to the heart beat of the cosmos. All for a small fee.' This wry humour marks all the stories and you come across these unexpected gems. Is it the impact of London on the writers of South Asian background. I know I must not stereotype but fed on a diet of English writing one thinks wry humour belongs there and not here or hereabouts. Stars may lie too. 'And We are All Made of Stars' by Rohan Kar leaves Rupinder staring at the bright twinkling 'liars' or are they?

All the stories love London. 'Fifteen years since London and love had happened to me.' This is Rita Mehta who goes 'To London' by Mona Dash. Rita tries to touch base with a special past. 'I had to learn to let go of love and still live.' But now she is in London where the special past happened. 'People could be forgotten, but not love, not London.' And an echo from that past is heard, 'It is humiliating to think he had to go after something foreign.' Is it better if the one with whom one's partner has committed adultery belongs to one's own caste, race, class creed?

'Naz' by Iman Qureshi has a father who is mortified to have a private school educated Pakistani daughter working at a Pakistani take-away. Love is also ease. Naz has a dim view of relationships, mother with bruises all over, 'For all the beaters there are ten cheaters'. There is nothing lovely about love, and it is for saps who watched too much Disney, she thinks. Then she meets Katrina. Love is about doubts and wanting to say 'No' like Matrika, but Naz realizes that love is also about just walking along the beach with all the food in 'the same basket'.

For all the writers London has happened as it happened for Rita Mehta. 'The sun is

stirring up dust, sweat people as they cram onto Oxford Street.' (Rocky Romeo) In London, he could be from anywhere any land any place.' (Three Singers) or 'May be that's the moment I fall in love with London' (To London). Susmita in the Foreword says that there is no stereotyping of issues or characters. That is true. But the stories are definitely by and of people of South Asian origin for whom London has happened. 'Do you feel English? British? Indian? Wholly of one culture? A bit of both? Disconnected from both?' (Three Singers.) Yes. Good questions and may be tough to answer. We almost get to know the real Rita or Rupinder or Naz or the others by the time you come to the end of the story. Should every story have a zing finish? I do not know. But it is tough to craft an effective end to a short story. If Soul Sisters has a conclusion like that, there are others which do not have an O'Henry ending but fit just so.

'Suddenly desperate to get out, "Can we go for iced buns?"

'Now?'

'Please.'

I quite liked this at the end of Farrah Yusuf's story. As I liked the whole collection.

Prabha Sridevan is a former Judge of the Madras High Court, and a former Chairman of the Intellectual Property Appellate Board. She writes regularly in Tamil and English. *Seeing in the Dark: Short Stories by R. Chudamani* (OUP 2015) is her first translation.