

BOOK REVIEWS

Women Against the Raj: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment

By Joyce Chapman Lebra

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, 132 pp, ISBN 978-981-230-808-5

Review by Joseph M. Fernando, University of Malaya

This book provides a captivating insight into a little known women's army, a wing of the Indian National Army, in Malaya that was involved in operations to liberate India from British rule during the Second World War. This women's regiment has gained something of a cult image among history enthusiasts. This is partly because very little details are known about the exploits of these young rebels and the traditionally conservative role of women perceived in Indian society in that era.

Joyce Lebra's book thus provides a refreshing window into the almost-forgotten experiences of this women's regiment that previously remained scarcely researched. It sheds some light as to what motivated these young women to become involved in a difficult war and the circumstances in which they were drawn or inspired to join this Japanese-sponsored armed outfit. The fact that the theme is undertaken by this renowned academic of Indian nationalism has given this medium-sized book a higher academic profile and standing.

Recruited largely from among the teenage women from the rubber estates in Malaya but led by well-educated middle and upper class Indian women from Malaya (and Burma), the Rani of Jhansi Regiment came into being in July 1943 headed by a medical doctor, Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan. The wing came into being despite Japanese opposition to a women's wing in the INA. Lakshmi was instrumental in recruiting young women from all over Malaya to join the freedom movement. She travelled around the country during this wartime period to give talks on the 'freedom movement' and to recruit women.

These young women were inspired by Indian nationalist Subash Chandra Bose's campaign to liberate India from British rule. His speeches in Malaya on the need to free India from colonial rule were closely followed and inspired many among the Indian community. Many of these women indicated in the interviews conducted by the author that they were inspired to join the regiment after having read or heard Bose's speeches. Lebra observes that this calling was an opportunity for these women to gain self-respect and to assert their sense of identity in a difficult and even oppressive environment. The rubber estates were, she notes, the economic, cultural and social environment that produced most of the volunteers in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

Almost half the 132-page book is devoted to the discussion of the origins and evolution Indian nationalism and the involvement of Indian nationalist Subash Chandra Bosh in leading the Malaya-based Indian National Army (INA). Then the author turns to the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and develops an engaging narrative about the exploits of these Indian women in Malaya, some of whom saw action in Burma. Drawing on numerous interviews of survivors of the Regiment's campaign in Burma, where some of them were deployed from March 1944 to August 1945, the author provides a revealing insight into nature of the struggle shouldered by these women and their sense of purpose. The narrative

which also draws from archival research is well-threaded into a clear and lucid historical account of the regiment. An excellent collection of pictures provides the reader with a sense of time and place of the period being examined.

This book could have been researched in more detail but as the author notes in passing it was a short project with some limited funding and this perhaps may have led to rather brief account of this very interesting history of a group of young Malayan women. Nevertheless, this short narrative packs a lot of information about the Rani of Jhansi Regiment that has erstwhile remained unknown to most and some revelations about the Indian nationalist movement. The first-hand accounts of the survivors narrated in the book in particular provide vivid images of the wartime period, their livelihood and the nature of challenges they faced in the frontlines. It also sheds some light on *raison d'être* that inspired these young women to take up arms.

Equally important, this book provides a persuasive explanation for the emergence of an Indian-based army outside India and the motivations behind this movement which are not always visible in the historical accounts of the Second World War or the Indian nationalist movement. Lebra is able to trace succinctly the various stages of the development of this freedom movement in Malaya in relation to what was happening in India and in Southeast Asia during the time and this provides the context in which the INA and, subsequently, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment emerged. The use of oral evidence enhances the historical narrative considerably.

This well-narrated, colourful and compact book is a useful addition to the historiography of Malaya and, in particular, women's movements and war history in Southeast Asia. It could well inspire further research into the women's regiment.

Ripples and Other Stories

By Shih-Li Kow

Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2008, 186 pp, ISBN 978-983-3221-23-3

Review by Carol Leon, University of Malaya

Over the past two decades, quite a few collections of Malaysian short stories in English have been published. Being stories about this country, many of them invariably deal with issues of belonging, history and, particularly, racial identity. Shih-Li Kow's *Ripples and Other Stories* is no exception. The tales in this collection revolve around these staple themes but with one, in my opinion, striking difference. They tend to move away from past events and happenings that have plotted our historical narrative - for instance the riots of May 13, the Japanese Occupation, British rule - and instead try to evoke what it is like living in Malaysia today.

This is certainly not to say that the historical dimension is suppressed or ignored in *Ripples*. This is far from true. There are numerous references to the past (both personal and public) in these stories which demonstrate how one cannot know oneself if the past is not confronted and understood. But Kow moves a step further from merely telling about the past to portray the various challenges and problems facing contemporary Malaysians. *Ripples and Other Stories* is about postcolonial, multicultural Malaysia.

The collection evokes various sensations and experiences which have become such a part of our lives to the extent that we rarely think about them but smile in wry recognition when brought to our attention. There are beautifully described village scenes: "Any eye jaded by the tedium of the greenery could find relief in the sight of an occasional marshland with flowering water lilies... or be surprised by a chance view of a *wakaf* framed by curving coconut trees" ("The Courting of Cik Zahirah": 17). And in "Grey Cats" there is a description of a shoptop which is typical of those found all over the country: "City Medical Centre for Obstetrics and Gynaecology was a four-storey shoptop at the end of a short block. Restoran Hameed, and Hotel Transworld, which rented out rooms by the hour, anchored the other corner ... I walked past a wonderful array of sights and smells, a stall selling fried food under an umbrella ... If I had to spend my lunchtime in the neighbourhood, I would give that *sambal* a try" (61-2). A wide sweep of Malaysian life is covered in *Ripples* from *kampung* scenes to the rooftop condominiums overlooking the Petronas Twin Towers.

However, what is even more admirable about Kow's narratives is the way they try to lay bare the human psyche. For example, Michael in "Seeking Frangipani" could easily be dismissed as the yuppie Malaysian, solely shaped by a greed for material things. But the author shows another side to Michael where the trappings of wealth fail to give him joy. Everything in his beautiful apartment has been decorated and chosen by an interior designer and Michael frantically goes looking for frangipani plants so as to put his own stamp onto his opulent abode. But he finds it impossible to do so and feels a great "compulsion to run" (76). One suggestion is that sometimes, try as we might, we cannot run away from our constructed roles and selves.

One feature which also separates *Ripples* from other short story collections, and which makes it compelling, is that although each story can stand on its own, it is vital that we read the stories in a larger context—meaning that we make connections between them. This is a clever technique used by Kow which enables her to flesh-out her characters in a way that would be quite impossible in a short story given the particular restrictions of the genre. Thus people keep re-appearing in *Ripples* and, because of this, we better understand their motives, aspirations and fears. This makes the reading of this collection very enjoyable.

Ripples is important to scholars and students of Malaysian literature in English because it deals with the theme of ethnicity. It explores the misunderstandings among races which still haunt our society. In "Deep Fried Devils", hawkers of different ethnic origin complain about how inappropriate it is for one race to sell food normally associated with another. Ramlah angrily tells her husband: "That coffee shop there sells *nasi lemak panas* ... All that is ours. What about *sambal belacan* and *kerabu*, isn't that our mother's inheritance?" (53) Lan Jie, on the other hand, rants to her customers, "What else will we be forced to give up? Already Malays are selling soy bean milk, *tau foo fah*, *yong tau foo*, *char kuay teow* ... What next?" (51).

Though dealt with in a humorous vein, the message in *Ripples* is clear. Malaysians are a complex group of people whose lives are inextricably linked and so any attempt to categorise and stereotype them is ridiculously futile. Instead there is an urgent need to appreciate differences and not be afraid of change.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

SARJANA, the journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, is a multi-disciplinary journal published twice a year by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Contributions of articles based on original research are invited from scholars working in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Manuscripts

Three paper copies of each manuscript should be sent to the **Chief Editor, SARJANA, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Lembah Pantai, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**. Those who wish to submit their articles online need to register first at: <http://umrefjournal.um.edu.my>, login and then upload their articles on to the website. Articles are accepted for consideration for publication on the understanding that they are not under review for possible publication elsewhere. Manuscripts will not be returned to the authors. Articles which do not conform to the format described below will not be considered for publication. Responsibility for opinions expressed and the accuracy of the facts in the articles published rest solely with the author(s).

Typescript: Articles should be typed double-spaced on one side of an A4-sized paper with 2.5cm margin on all sides. The text of the article should be in Times Roman, 12 points. The article should be preceded by a title page containing the author's name(s), affiliation, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address, and the title of the paper.

Language: Articles submitted to the journal may be written in either the English Language or Bahasa Melayu.

Length: Articles should not be less than 5,000 words or exceed 8,000 words, including notes and references.

Abstract: Each article should be accompanied by an abstract in English of not more than 200 words. Please also indicate a few keywords.

Paragraphing and Headings: An excessive number of paragraphs should be avoided. The convention adopted for headings is as follows:

THIS IS A FIRST LEVEL HEADING

First level headings should be typed in capitals and in bold print. First level headings should be aligned left on a separate line. The first text line that follows should also be aligned left.

This is a second level heading.

Second level headings are aligned left in a separate line. Only the first letter and proper nouns should be in capital letters. The first text line that follows should also be aligned left.

This is a third level heading.

Third level headings should be in italics and aligned left. The text follows on the same line.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Notes and references should use the Harvard Referencing System.

1. **End Notes:** The end notes system in which the superscript numbers are inserted in the text and referred to in numerical order at the end of the article under the heading **Notes** should be used, if necessary. Examples:

Book: Means, GP 1970, *Malaysian Politics*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, p. 10.

Chapter in Book: Gullick, JM 2006, 'An Amateur Historian', in Tarling, N (ed), *Historians and Their Discipline*, Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Kuala Lumpur, pp. 41-44.

Journal Article: Fauza Ab. Ghaffar, 2000, 'The Urban Society in Malaysia: Poverty Amidst Plenty', *Sarjana*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 50-56.

Thesis: Roff, M 1964, *The Malayan Alliance and its Accommodation of Communal Pressures, 1952-1962*, M.A. thesis, University of Malaya.

Conference Paper: Thambiah, S 2002, 'Women, Families and Economic Restructuring in Malaysia and Singapore: Reflections on Two Gendered Societies', Ninth Malaysia-Singapore Forum, 28-30 October 2002, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Government Publications: Government of Malaysia 1991, *The Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000*, Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur.

Newspapers: *The Star*, 31 Aug. 2008.

Personal Communication: D. Wong 2008, pers. comm., 7 Aug. If in-text reference, it should appear as: (D. Wong 2008, pers. comm., 7 Aug)

British Colonial Office Documents: MacGillivray to Secretary of State, 1 May 1955, CO 1030/211 (12).

2. **Citation in the text:** References in the text should use the Harvard Referencing System (name of author, date and page). Example: (Means 1970, p. 10) or (Means 1970)

3. **References:** A full list of references used should be listed at the end of the article in alphabetical order. Journal titles should not be abbreviated. Examples:

Book: Means, GP 1970, *Malaysian Politics*, Hodder and Stoughton, London.

Chapter in Book: Gullick, JM 2006, 'An Amateur Historian', in Tarling, N (ed), *Historians and Their Discipline*, Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Kuala Lumpur.

Journal Article: Fauza Ab. Ghaffar, 2000, 'The Urban Society in Malaysia: Poverty Amidst Plenty', *Sarjana*, vol. 17, no. 1.

Thesis: Roff, M 1964, *The Malayan Alliance and its Accommodation of Communal Pressures, 1952-1962*, M.A. thesis, University of Malaya.

Conference Paper: Thambiah, S 2002, 'Women, Families and Economic Restructuring in Malaysia and Singapore: Reflections on Two Gendered Societies', Ninth Malaysia-Singapore Forum, 28-30 October 2002, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Government Publications: Government of Malaysia 1991, *The Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000*, Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur.

If in doubt, include all bibliographic details.

TABLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables and illustrations should appear separately from the text and should conform to page size. Tables should be numbered in sequence with Arabic numerals and contain explanatory captions, each on a separation sheet.

Figures, diagrams and maps should be included in a single numbered series and designated 'Figures'. Captions to illustrations should be grouped on one sheet. Each figure should be submitted on a separate sheet. Original illustrations in publishable form should be submitted.

The approximate position of tables and figures should be indicated in the text. Sources of tables and figures should be cited.

OFFPRINTS

Each contributor will receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which his/her article appears.

BOOK REVIEW

Books for review should be sent to the Chief Editor.

COPYRIGHT

© Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya
All rights reserved. Requests for permission to reprint articles should be directed to the Chief Editor, **SARJANA, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Lembah Pantai, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.**