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dangers women risk in the criminal underbelly of the city.

The most haunting aspect about this book is the loneliness it captures. Ada and her daughters' stories showcase the strength and resilience women possess despite being forced to endure extreme hardship. Amina, Ada's eldest daughter who eventually dies of AIDS and drug abuse at the age of twenty-eight, attributes her emaciated state to systems and individuals that engineer the use and abuse of women like her for their gain, discarding her when she no longer serves a useful purpose.

Barclays Amadi's *Ada* is indeed a poignant book which makes us grieve for women living in a failing nation state. Indeed both Udenwe's and Amadi's texts are uncompromising in their portrayal of Nigerian politics and society, exploring its many cracks and fractures, and deftly charting the on-going effects of postcolonial corruption which remains tragic and shocking.

Janet Wilson

A World Elsewhere

Shanta Acharya

iUniverse, Bloomington, 2015, pb
360pp ISBN 1 4917 4364
www.iuniverse.com

At the heart of Shanta Acharya's engaging first novel, *A World Elsewhere*, are issues which she has explored in her poetry: the instability of language, the elusiveness of 'truth', the capriciousness of fate. These stem from problems that beset the novel's talented heroine, Asha, when she mistakes the existence of romantic love upon first meeting a young man; the emotion that usually springs from the heart is in her case based on only the flimsiest of acquaintances and a misjudgement of character. Her will to independence and determination to pursue her own course in life, leads to the fatal decision to marry him.

This troubling story of a young woman's unfortunate (but not irreversible) mistake can be read as a comment upon the tradition of arranged marriages, for Asha's disastrous choice seems to suggest that youthful rebellion is not necessarily the most successful pathway to personal happiness. The heroine's overturning of her parents' wish that she should enter into an arranged marriage, and dismissal of the dowry backfires, and causes her to question the very meaning of her existence.

Set in India in the 1960s and 1970s when Indira Gandhi held ministerial posts and later became prime minister, the novel shines a light onto the problems caused by the strict moral and behavioural codes which governed Indian (mainly Hindu) society and the frustrations and tensions that many, especially young women, felt in that era. Stepping out of their preordained roles was an experience as momentous as going to the moon. When Asha comes to write a story about a heroine who decides to wed someone of her own choice she crystallises the moment of independence with: 'That's one small step for a woman, one giant leap for womankind', adapting Neil Armstrong's words just one day after they appeared in the newspaper.

Acharya's novel is written from an insider's view and registers the contradictions of coming from a loving, middle-class family which nevertheless experiences grief, due to the parents' unhappiness, and unsuccessful marriages of Asha and one of her brothers. The problems of communication between the generations, the barriers in getting to know someone of the opposite sex, the taboos on sex before marriage, violence within marriage, the dishonesties and subterfuges that come with career ambition when motivated by jealousy or revenge, as when Asha's university exam results are deliberately marked down: these

are at the core of the novel's psychological tensions and swirling emotions. But there are uplifting moments too, for another destiny awaits Asha. Despite her youthful idealism in affairs of the heart, she is gifted enough to carve out a vocational path, by first taking up a lectureship in her own state, then winning a scholarship to Oxford, even though it means a painful parting of another sort, from her beloved parents and brothers, and in fact from India itself. Acharya's heroine reaches beyond the limitations of her upbringing and society and forges her way to academic success, something she did not originally aspire to do.

This debut novel has been described as 'having the feel of a classic coming of age novel and marriage plot'. To this I would add that it asks questions about a key issue in Indian society, even today when more people exercise free will in marriage. Are arranged marriages a good thing? This is the theme of the great Bollywood blockbuster of 1995, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ('the one with a true heart will win the bride'), one of the longest running Hindi films ever. Like the film, where parental opposition is also overruled (but the freely chosen marriage succeeds), *A World Elsewhere* gives insight into intergenerational conflict. It also offers moments of self-discovery such as the heroine's words at the end: 'All my life I've been waiting. All the things that happen to me and those that do not, all the people I meet and those I don't, keep defining me inexplicably. Life is what happens to us while we wait for things to happen.' Asha's need for love, and the confusion, unhappiness and suffering that come from her misjudgement of life are conveyed with tact and honesty. And there are fascinating images of the Indian domestic and social life of the heroine and her extended family: births, deaths, funerals, Hindu religious festivals, and the minutiae of marriage negotiations are all deftly woven into

the background to this tale of romantic love gone wrong.

Jocelyn Watson

Loop of Jade

Sarah Howe

Chatto, London, 2015, pb

64pp ISBN 0 7011 8869 6 £10.00

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Sarah Howe was born in Hong Kong to an English father and a Chinese mother and moved to England as a child. Drawing upon this mixed racial heritage in this, her first published collection, which won the T S Eliot Prize in 2015, she insightfully and vividly explores how memory, heritage and home are complicated by distance, loss and the things we do, or hold on to, to keep them alive. *Loop of Jade* opens with 'Mother's Jewellery Box':

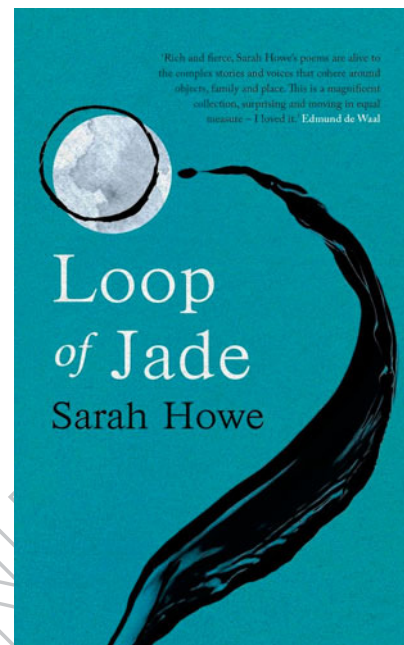
*the twin lids
of the black lacquer box
open away – (1)*

This image conjures an object as exquisitely crafted as Howe's poetry; simply wrought yet replete with myriad reflections and representations, of a duality that is obvious and yet furtive, both concealed and easily released. Indeed, from the beginning of this collection, we are alerted to the need to look beyond and to explore the complexities that lie behind what ostensibly appears simple throughout. Every image is reflected, refracted, something else — 'language revolves like a ream of stars' (46).

Throughout the collection, Howe explores the tension between what we cannot know about what has gone before and what we must know in order to exist as sentient beings. *Loop of Jade*, therefore, is also about the invention, creation and fabrication of our knowledge about things, how we learn about and order our world, how it is reified, how we pass that knowledge on and what happens to us when we

receive it. The collection's epigraph is a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges that reads, these 'ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies ... attributed by Dr Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*'. Franz Kuhn was a German lawyer who spoke Chinese and was assigned to a delegation to Peking as an interpreter in the early 1900s. Whether the encyclopedia existed has been the subject of much debate. But Borges's 'citation' was cited by Foucault — perhaps the truth of its existence is not really what matters. In *Loop of Jade*, the categories 'attributed by ... Kuhn' ('that animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs' and so on) punctuate the collection as titles of Howe's own poems, as she plays upon their uncertain origin yet fills each one with meaning — these 'categorised' works reveal the cultural genealogies (folk tales, legends) that both divide and connect her own more 'personal' pieces such as 'Crossing from Guangdong', 'Loop of Jade' and 'Islands'.

What is personal, however, is an interesting question that is probed by Howe as her work explores the intricate, miniscule grains on the surface of things, and roughens the texture of familiar memories. What do we keep for ourselves and how do we live in the world while constantly accommodating the alienation that accompanies our everyday negotiations between the milieu that exists inside our minds and the one that we experience around us? In 'Crossing from Guangdong', the 'humid strains of Frank/Sinatra' are 'unexpectedly strange', while despite being 'back', the over-sauced 'anaemic/bamboo shoots' are 'not like you would make at home' (2–3). Do we draw strength from our own menagerie, forge a sense of identity and belonging, or become trapped within it? This duality always threatens to differentiate us, and to remind us that once upon a time we left.



As someone who was also born in Hong Kong, also with a mixed racial heritage, the opening words of 'Crossing from Guangdong' resonate vividly:

Something sets us looking for a place.
For many minutes every day we lose
Ourselves to somewhere else (2)

Howe awakens the sense that our journeys to discover somewhere we long to call home, are the projects of our own imaginations and desires, blended together with precious memories about what we once knew and took for granted. In speaking of her own experience, Howe captures how we hold tight to what we know; because it resonates and makes us feel closer to things that are no longer there, and makes us feel more 'at home'. But for Howe home is a complicated idea. Not only because she left Hong Kong, where her mother was born, as a child. But, more importantly for this collection, because for her mother the idea of home was as precarious (and permanent) as the 'street of four-storey plaster buildings' she lived in. The universal, human need for a place to call home, that