

Scholarly look at Myanmar

Written by Indian writer, it presents a female perspective of the country

THIS has been one of the richest literary seasons for the Indian diaspora in Singapore. Many renowned authors were in town to launch or talk about their books. While eminent novelist Amitav Ghosh was in town to launch his third book of the Ibis Trilogy, *Flood Of Fire*, first-time writer Nisid Hajari was here to launch his non-fiction title, *Midnight's Furies* (Penguin/Viking).

Since we have mentioned both these books in our previous columns, we will skip further discussion on them.

Instead, I want to talk about a couple of exciting books penned by writers belonging to the South Asian diaspora: *Escape From Baghdad!* by Saad Z. Hossain (Unnamed Press/Aleph Book Company, India, 2015) and *The Female Voice Of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit To Aung San Suu Kyi* by Nilanjana Sengupta (South Asia edition: Cambridge University Press, India, under Foundation Books imprint, 2015).

The most recent among these books is Sengupta's scholarly treatise on Myanmar – in fact, the book will be released in Singapore only in late September. She is a visiting scholar at Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore).

There aren't many Indian writers who write on Myanmar, so this is an important work of scholarship. The publisher describes the book as a "commentary on the evolving state of Myanmar and female thought from colonial times to the present, seen through the eyes of four Burmese female activist-writers".

The book presents a female perspective on the history and political evolution of Myanmar. Through an exploration of the literary works of four carefully-selected women activists – four major voices in the book: Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Thida and Aung San Suu Kyi – who have also been prolific writers of their times, the book seeks a fresh evaluation of the Burmese narrative.

And what did Sengupta discover about Myanmar while doing this project?

She said: "As far as the image of Myanmar that emerges when we look through the eyes of these four women – it is an evolving one. When Khin Myo Chit or Daw Amar writes about growing up in British Burma, despite the underlying tension and angst at the burgeoning British influence, the images are warm, colourful ones.

"Khin Myo Chit, for instance, writes of early mornings spent in her grandmother's home in Saga-



Evolving commentary... Nilanjana Sengupta (left) is one of the few Indian writers who has written about Myanmar. Her book (above) will be released in Singapore late next month.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZAFAR ANJUM

ing when yellow-robed monks from a nearby monastery arrived at their doorstep and her grandmother ladled steaming hot rice and boiled peas soaked in sesame oil into their black lacquered alms bowls. The child Khin Myo Chit would watch as the monks walked on in a solemn single file and women from every house down the street came to take part in this act of making merit.

"In contrast is Ma Thida's perspective. Born in 1966, she would not know a Myanmar that was not militarily controlled and her first memory would be of strife – of the Sino-Burmese riots which began in 1967. And again in Aung San Suu Kyi's contemporary writing a more positive picture emerges – of a Myanmar attempting a transition towards partial democracy."

What challenges did she face doing this project?

She said: "I think this project was one of the most difficult I could have taken up and perhaps for the same reason it was also deeply satisfying. Language was a major barrier since to truly understand any of these authors, their Burmese writing needs to be read and assimilated. Khin Myo Chit and Aung San Suu Kyi write partially in English while the other two write almost entirely in Burmese.

"Besides, there was of course the issue of research sources. The state-run libraries of Myanmar are not easily accessible to foreigners and because of the country's turbulent past a lot of the archival records have been ruined."

The other book is *Escape From Baghdad!* by young Bangladeshi writer Saad Z. Hossain which has been brought to India by David Davidar's Aleph Book Company. The book was greeted with massive acclaim in the US when it was published there by Unnamed Press. It was hailed as a comic masterpiece and one of the Great War novels – a *Catch-22* of the Gulf War, according to the *Financial Times*. The well-known blog for bibliophiles, *Book Riot*, named it its Book of the Year.

For those who have not heard of Hossain, he writes in a niche genre of fantasy, science fiction and black comedy with an action-adventure twist. He's a monthly columnist for the *Daily Star* literary page and lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

