Sharifah Aishah Osman and Tutu Dutta (eds). *The Principal Girl: Feminist Tales from Asia***. Kuala Lumpur: Gerakbudaya Enterprise, 2019. 222pp. ISBN: 9789670311159.**

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The argument of whether or not folk tales and fairy tales can be "feminist" has long been a matter of scholarly debate. Since the 1970s, the two opposing camps on the matter have not come to a happy-ever-after resolution. Popular fairy tales relied on the passive princess stereotype who awaited her prince and fulfillment through heterosexual marriage. Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) argues that Snow White and Sleeping Beauty teach girls to be rape victims, while "Beauty and the Beast" advises them to put up with domestic abuse. Only a few folk and fairy tales feature the plucky resourcefulness and intellectual gravitas of its female protagonists. More recent incarnations of the "princess" are celebrated for their independence and ability to pass the Bechdel test. Perhaps the lack of resolution to the debate is a good thing for it provides space for subversive retellings with more ambiguity, ambivalence, and complexity rarely accrued to female characters.

Edited by Sharifah Aishah Osman and Tutu Dutta, *The Principal Girl: Feminist Tales from Asia* is a timely contribution to the Malaysian literary landscape so lacking in interesting stories about messy, ambiguous, and "unlikeable" women. A few stories stand out for their sly humour and subversion. Preeta Samarasan, an accomplished Malaysian novelist, contributes two stories that turn the traditional fairy tale and folk tale on their head. These stories are subversive because they are told from a woman's cynical perspective, a panacea to the complacent and escapist formulas of fairy tales. Samarasan's central characters in "The Girl on the Mountain" and "Red and White" defy the status quo. Similar to alternative retellings of popular stories in the tradition of Jean Rhys and Angela Carter, they are tales told from the perspective of maligned characters, the ugly sisters who were rebuffed by princes. They are the young women who resist a reproductive fate as wives of kings and producers of royal heirs.

The anthology is divided into the past ("Stories from long ago") and present ("Contemporary stories") but one can't help from wondering if the "past" and "present" here are actually misnomers. "Stories from long ago" are retold from a contemporary perspective with contemporary sensibilities and reinterpretations as "feminist" tales. What is striking about the "past" is the depiction of bloody violence and war in stories by Hezreen Abdul Rashid ("The Veiled Knight") and Sumitra Selvaraj ("The Queen's Last Stand") where women impress and intimidate men with their deadly sword-fighting. Something interesting for consideration is how sharply different

representations of violence are in the "past" and "present". In stories set in modern times, violence occurs in moments of domestic abuse and threat of sexual assault against the female characters. Are scenes of graphic violence by and against women in contemporary society unsuitable for younger readers? Does the past evoke an empty space of lawlessness where violent retribution has no legal and ethical consequences?

The contemporary stories by Anna Tan, Julya Oui, and Golda Mowe play host to benign supernatural beings and the incredulously courageous girls who befriend them. In Southeast Asian societies where modernity exists side by side with the uncanny, where taboos and ghost stories are meant to constrain the behaviour of girls and to prevent them from going out alone at night and speaking to strangers, these stories offer a critique of cultural constructions and superstitious traditions of danger, impurity, and the afterlife. It would be equally fascinating to read contemporary stories about women who defy these taboos and symbolic boundaries when they are no longer liberated by childhood and its lack of strict imposition of gender roles.

Other stories in the anthology, however, shine less not because they are poorly told but because they are vague in their feminist message. Not their fault. There isn't really a definition of feminism provided in the anthology. But rather than one ideological strand it would be more appropriate for a collective of Malaysian feminisms that coordinate to undo the norms of rape culture and stubborn structural inequalities that create division between women. Stories like "The Accidental Feminist" by Latifah Tamerlane and "Saving Grace" by Renie Leng rehearse middle-class bourgeois aspirations of Malaysian parents: be an obedient studious girl, get good grades and you will be deemed a "success". Getting a good education and employment are indeed conditions for personal independence. But why stop there? Where are the stories about the "unfeminine" desire for power and authority, and "unfeminine" emotions of anger and discontent? Feminism does not provide comfort to the status quo or seek societal approval but rouses us from sleepwalking into neoliberal middle-class complicity.

To return to feminist debates about fairy tales, it would be too simplistic to argue that stories have a direct effect on their readers. Rather, even the most deplorable fairy tale can function as an "interpretive device", a literary resource that is good to think with and this applies to female readers of all ages. The apparent timelessness of fairy tales and folk tales can provide mythic validation to changing realities. *The Principal Girl: Feminist Tales from Asia* offers clues and possibilities for future boundary-pushing feminist storytelling in the Southeast Asian context. We await more stories by local authors about clever, cruel, silly, lazy, sinister heroines who overturn cultural conventions and dismantle the binary of "good" and "bad" femininity.