

Veena Gokhale. *Bombay Wali and Other Stories*. Toronto: Guernica, 2013. 175 pp. \$20 (Paperback).

Erstwhile journalist and debutant writer Veena Gokhale has a new collection of twelve short stories titled *Bombay Wali*, offering a unique vignette of Bombay (now called Mumbai), with its myriad layers, diversity, and vivid characters that bring to life the urban city space of Bombay of yester years. The selection of the title in itself is intriguing; Gokhale's use of the name "Bombay" instead of the city's official moniker "Mumbai" suggestively distances her work from the nationalist politics that drove the city's official name change in 1995. Most of the stories in the collection are set in Bombay in the eighties and early nineties, though some are also located in other Indian cities and in Nepal and Japan. What I especially appreciated about this collection is that Gokhale does not offer orientalist fare selling exotica to the readers. Gokhale's Bombay is not the flashy, elite, "imagined" space of Bollywood films, nor is it a one-dimensional space of violent poverty as depicted in the popular film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Bombay does not exist as a monolith, but, instead, becomes a protagonist in the collection; Gokhale presents the city as both a backdrop and as an organic, generative space filled with dynamism.

The stories also depart from the usual subject matter and representations of India in recent fiction. Gokhale's characters come from different castes, ethnic groups, and classes and struggle to find a space in the sprawling city. The first story, "Bombay Wali" tells the story of three women protagonists, who are outsiders to the city, and are constantly "sick of being broke." They struggle to survive in Bombay and plot to rob a bank by donning *burqas*. Without giving much away, it is important to note that the story explores how each of the three women-migrants tries to fit in, to become a "Bombay wali." The ending of the story reminds the reader of the city's pervasive presence once again, closing with evocative details about Bombay's many neighborhoods from Dadar, Worli, V.T, Versova, to Marve and its often-referenced sea-front.

In one of the most interesting stories of the collection titled "Freire Stopped in Bombay," Gokhale portrays a young Dalit student, Dilip, who comes from a small village in Maharashtra and wins a scholarship to study in Bombay. The challenges of language—the different degrees of fluency in English and the varied accents of the characters—is poignantly highlighted in this absorbing story about the migration experience from rural to urban areas in India. Dilip is awed and overwhelmed by the massive city and its possibilities, but he quickly

realizes that his large scholarship is not enough to sustain himself in the city and goes hungry for days. Yet, he decides not to ask for help from anyone. Gokhale deftly presents Dilip's struggle and growing angst as he desperately attempts to find his place in Bombay, where there is very little space for him. Throughout the story, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* haunts the story: it is one of Dilip's favorite books, and yet it seems to fail him and his complex experience of un-belonging. Ultimately, Dilip's acute social alienation leads to his suicide, suggestively depicted as an act of dissent.

In another story, "Reveries of Riot," the protagonist, Mira, faces a city with a communal riot ensuing outside her window. The growing aggression and violence outside, demarcated through the frame of the window, gradually seeps into the private life of the protagonist as she imagines the riot outside; the external riot parallels Mira's inward chaos, as she seeks an escape from the tiny space of the apartment. Interestingly, the riot manifests itself as a space for subversion and resistance against her limited life.

Gokhale's work, in comparison to other debut fictional collections like Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, is ambitious in its scope and themes. Gokhale's stories traverse cities, boundaries, classes and geographical borders. Beyond the urbanscape of Bombay, one suddenly finds an odd little story called "Snapshot," about a lonely, old woman named Sukiyo living on the outskirts of Toyko with her daughter. Sukiyo responds to a newspaper ad that furnishes a makeshift "family" experience for her. Her acute loneliness and desperation to grasp one moment of "uninhibited" happiness is powerfully depicted in a style that reflects a certain measured detachment absent from the Bombay stories.

Gokhale's success in her first book lies in her ability to make everyday life, often banal and mundane, effortlessly interesting. Whether it is the Parsi protagonist, Feroza Billimoria, who suddenly faces her past in "Middle Age Jazz and Blues," or the successful businessman, Ashok, in "Absolution" who grapples with heritage and tradition, Gokhale has a remarkable eye for detail. Her complex and contradictory characters from diverse ethnic, caste, and class backgrounds negotiate Bombay's city space as one that is at times banal and at others, as if reminiscent of Vikram Chandra's award-winning collection of stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, uncanny. In the end, one can taste Bombay in Gokhale's writing, and that is no mean feat.

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