

A Tapestry of Colours

2

Stories from Asia

Edited by
ANITHA DEVI PILLAI

This book features 12 stories from Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia, written especially for young adults.

This specially curated anthology of short stories from Asia explores the human spirit and lives of the common man separated by time, space and culture, and yet united in the human spirit to overcome the difficulties that they face in life. It provides an insight into the rich and diverse landscape of Asia, as well as heritage and cultural practices. It also challenges pre-conceived notions of biases and beliefs about other cultures and opens up room for discussion on the differences that define the human race. Each story in this anthology is also accompanied by an essay from the writer, providing a rare look into the writer's mind and writing process.

A Tapestry of Colours 2 encourages readers to reflect on their own values, perspectives and identities, and reflect on how their own experiences, beliefs and actions impact society.

Featuring stories by

Clara Mok • Carol Pang • Karen Kao • Lalaine F Yanilla Aquino •
Debarree Gosh • Ismim Putera • Alice Bianchi-Clark • Heidi Emily
Eusebio-Abad • Sohana Manzoor • Sumitra Selvaraj • Tina Jimin
Walton • Prasanthi Ram

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Lotus Flower

Alice Bianchi-Clark

Buddhism is prevalent in Thailand and most temples are Buddhist. The Buddhists believe that when Buddha took his first steps into the mortal world, lotus blooms blossomed under his bare feet. That's why whether he is reclining, standing or sitting, Buddha is always portrayed on a lotus flower.

The lotus is a symbol of purity because it emerges from the mud to rise in the water. It is a sacred flower. Its pink-tinted white and short-lived blooms are scented. Its seed pods are sculptural. Its large, velvety, umbrella-like leaves are waterproof. In Thailand, the dead are honoured with incense sticks and lotus flowers. Monks wear saffron-coloured robes and often chant in temples. All footwear must be removed before entering temple precincts. White silk is widely worn for funerals. Tuk-tuks are motorised versions of rickshaws with open seating for passengers. Tuk-tuk rides in Bangkok are no longer as prevalent as they used to be.

Most children grow up with a few books, some with a few shelves; she grew up in a library.

Her destiny seemed sealed when she was brought back from the hospital, wailing. The fated placement of her Moses basket was, in all honesty, an afterthought. She had popped out a full four weeks early and in the tearful confusion that ensued, Father tucked the Moses basket under hovering shelves, until arrangements could be made to dispel the disquiet that had followed her stormy arrival.

Father's sister, Aunt Laetitia, flew into Bangkok with hairpins dangling from her golden hair and in quintessential British style, hired a nanny, whose exemplary qualifications would have made Mary Poppins sniff with approval. Aunt Laetitia had an English country manor to manage back in Herefordshire, including

two whippets and a husband, so she could not extend her stay indefinitely. Her maternal grandparents, *Khun Tab*¹ and *Khun Yai*,² moved in instead, with *Mae-baan*,³ their trusted helper. They called Father *Khun Por*,⁴ and the baby Ubon. The British nanny soon vanished, possibly on a gust of westerly wind, and Mother's plans for the nursery were abandoned.

Yet, even as a baby, Ubon knew better than to fuss. She soon outgrew the basket, which was replaced by a cot. Eventually, her cot was replaced by a small bed. In turn, that too was replaced by a lime green armchair, which stretched into a single bed at night and curled back into a cocoon during the daytime – *rather like a caterpillar*, Ubon thought.

The hazardous shelves overhead, on the contrary, became permanent fixtures, in spite of *Khun Tab*, *Khun Yai* and *Mae-baan*'s protests. More were added above and all around, until all the walls were wallpapered with the jumbled, variegated spines of the books Father collected. Wherever she looked, there were shelves piled alongside and upon one another – *like the layers of a humongous sponge cake*, Ubon thought.

As soon as she was old enough to read, Ubon started devouring the stories that made up her room, spine by spine, illustration by illustration. Barefoot, legs kicking in the air, she would lay on her belly for hours on the faded, peacock green rug with patterns fanning out like many tails. The characters in her books were the siblings she'd never had, the pets she'd never befriended – their adventures wilder than any in her imagination.

The tall window in her library was the most welcome fixture, because from where she liked to stand on tiptoe, on a pile of books,

1 "Khun" is a respectful Thai term for addressing family members, while "Tai" is the Thai word for maternal grandfather.

2 "Yai" is the Thai word for maternal grandmother.

3 "Mae" is the Thai word for mother. "Baan" is the Thai word for house. "Mae-baan" is Thai for a live-in helper.

4 "Por" is the Thai word for father.

it seemed to frame the city's snaking river and skyscrapers, vying vertiginously – *stepping stones to the clouds*, Ubon thought.

“Cordelia?”

A dainty beaded slipper peeped in between the terracotta pots and disappeared. Only her aunt called her by her first name, her British name. Ubon looked up, but sitting where she was, behind the rickety table, she went unnoticed.

Father's bare, gentle feet padded onto the stone slabs. He was absent-minded, except when he was tending his prized lotuses, which flowered in water-filled pots around the perimeter of their balcony. As accustomed as she was to his silence, Ubon enjoyed the proximity to Father and often sat among the lotuses, spying on him – *playing peek-a-boo*, Ubon thought.

She dipped her fingers in the murky water, tempting the guppy fish to nibble at her fingertips. She was envious of the hours Father liked to spend undisturbed, weeding and humming. It seemed so unfair, given the lotuses thrived regardless of his attention.

“Oh, there you are,” Aunt Laetitia said, laying down her tray. She stooped over a lotus flower, held it to her nose and sniffed. Ubon crinkled hers; the heady scent of lotus flowers was an unwelcome reminder of Mother's absence.

Ubon much preferred the unscented lotus seed pods. There was something so architectural about them, where their seeds became gateways to multiple possibilities.

Aunt Laetitia busied herself with setting out the delicate cups and delectable treats. She invited Father to sit at the table.

Father's blonde hair was greying, his cheeks were gaunt, and his mouth set into a perennial, stiff line, which he rubbed with his forefinger. He looked at the white blooms as if enchanted by a nostalgic memory.

“I'm enamoured with all my gardens, Gerald,” said Aunt Laetitia, “but I must say your balcony is utterly charming. There's

something so healing about these lotus flowers. I understand why she loved them so.”

Ubon longed to hear stories about her mother. She yearned to find out who she was. *Khun Tab* and *Khun Yai* were not storytellers, and Father was, well, Father.

His blue eyes were transfixed on a proud stalk with its protective, velvety, umbrella-like leaves – *so like Father*, Ubon thought.

“She would be so proud of you, Gerald.”

Father stiffened.

“How I wish I could persuade both of you to come to England, but she is the reason you are still here after all these years. Gerald?”

A swallow flew past, tracing figures of eight above Ubon's head. Even Ubon knew Bangkok was Mother's hometown.

* * *

Most children look forward to their birthdays but not Ubon. Every year, she wished she could curl asleep and wake up a day later so as to skip it altogether. She detested the rituals they honoured that day, the cumbersome, sticky white silks they wore to the temple and the jolting, hair-tangling tuk-tuk ride. She loathed how the monks' incessant chanting buzzed in her ears, the dusty stone slabs blackened the soles of her bare feet, the smoky incense blurred her eyes, and the heady smell of the lotus flowers, which they invariably brought as offerings, triggered a choking sensation.

“*Khun Mae's favourite*,” *Khun Yai* said, referring to Mother. “When Buddha took his first steps into the mortal world, lotus blooms blossomed under his bare feet.”

Ubon knew how sacred lotuses were in Thailand, and how they grew abundant in and out of temples and among Buddhist statuary. Still, hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Mother's spirit was omnipresent and suffocating. Ubon wanted to tear away from