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Book Review

***Name, Place Animal Thing* by Daribha Lyndem**

Publisher: Zubaan Books. Date of Publication: 20 April 2021. Language: English. Price. No. pages 208.
Price: INR 329/- ISBN 10: 819476050X



Reviewed by

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Name, Place, Animal, Thing is an engrossing debut by Daribha Lyndem, a civil servant from Shillong, Meghalaya. Shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature 2021, it is a collection of ten chapters with a young Khasi girl from Shillong, named D, as the narrator who takes us through the memories of her childhood and teenage days, interspersed with depictions that many may easily relate to as D's life revolves around her family, teachers, and school friends. She captures with adorable simplicity childhood fantasies like greeting card shops, glitters, colour pencils, games, friends, adventure etc. Her innocent curiosity is overpowered because of her surroundings. The conflicts that are largely internal, though insignificant, are universal in their appeal and it is also important to note that these stories are narrated through the eyes of a child who captures and transmits these experiences with microscopic precision. These coming-of-age stories set during the early 2000s are fascinating that give us a peep into the intricacies of race, class, religion, and politics in the capital city of Shillong. While going through the narrator's account of the changes in her city that now barely holds the traces of what it previously was, readers may relate

to having experienced similar situations that quickly establish an undercurrent of 'mutuality' and nostalgia.

The vignettes in *Name, Place, Animal, Thing* are objective depictions where the narrator witnesses everything but remains a mute onlooker. She brings in bits and pieces of the lives of a few people around and in doing so, we get a glimpse of their predicaments and conflicts, but never their relevance to the narrative – except a haze of nostalgia that recollections often are.

We were the only house in the neighbourhood to have pretty white picket fences. They did not last very long. In time the rain seeped through the wood, damaging it, and the white paint cracked and turned grey like wrinkles on skin. They were soon replaced with a brick-and-mortar wall topped with spikes. At first it was just a brick wall, but the spikes were installed after Mr. Roy was attacked outside. (*NPAT*, p. 52)

Each chapter is focused on one character and through that character, readers are introduced to one more aspect of Shillong. Unfortunately, the narrator maneuvers the course and takes us through the happenings that cloud the 'concern' established at the beginning of the story. Owing to this, though all the individual depictions form the backdrop, the cultural and social intricacies and the volatility in Shillong are not embedded into the narrative or in the thematic development. "Except for the odd tussle between a non-tribal and the Khasis, in my young mind I felt hardly anything interesting went on in our town," (*NPAT*, p. 34) she says, referring to the antagonism between the Khasis that form the majority as one of the three major indigenous ethnic tribes of Meghalaya, and the *Dkhars*, the colloquial word to refer (often derogatory) to the non-tribals.

The author presents gripping narrations that depict the attitude of the Khasis towards the migrants from other communities such as Nepalis, Chinese, Biharis, and Bengalis; the violence against the 'outsiders' or the *Dkhars*; the political movements, and the religious dynamics of the city. The narrator captures the antipathy between Khasis and the Dkhars during her growing up years and skillfully interlaces them in the vignettes. In one such vignette, she records her helplessness. Bahadur, a kind Nepali who always assisted the entire housing community by sacrificing even his sleep and family time.

Bahadur worked as the guard, gardener, driver and caretaker all rolled into one. The place would be in shambles if not for him. He made life comfortable for everyone around him. (*NPAT*, p.10)

But, when an unfortunate event struck his family, he was left stranded as no one came forward to help him.

On hearing the noise, other neighbours came to their windows to ascertain what had happened but, as I watched, they did nothing to help. Mrs. Kharsyntiew, who lived with her three sons, peeked through the window while all this transpired. I saw the ruffle of the lace curtain being pulled back abruptly by someone in that house. They did not bother to come out.The Purkhayatas and the Lyngwas also watched from their windows. (*NPAT*, p. 22)

It is only her parents who went to help him, withstand the horrific incident. This incident makes her realize that it is not only the differences between the Dkhars and Khasis that are the causes of conflicts but something that goes much beyond that. This indifference is reintegrated when

Tommy Lu, a Chinese immigrant from Kolkata who moves to her City to run a successful Chinese restaurant was forced to shut down his business because he failed to pay Saw Dak, an insurgent group. As the narrator grows up, the focus in her stories also changes like her newfound emotional bond with her Hindi teacher. Throughout these stories, one aspect remains constant and it is how D always ruminates on the happenings around her. Albeit few stories that have a somber tone, Daribha dexterously weaves the stories and spruces them, making it easier for the readers to not feel too overwhelmed.

D's life, like the book, is a collection of memories that define and shape not only her ideas and thoughts but also opinions and emotions. The Khasi girl is constantly introspecting and questioning the world around her. The entire narrative becomes a mosaic etched in tales of living with differences, learning about inequalities, experiencing the odds and evens, and the unconditional exchanges in friendships all from the eyes of the narrator. This is a classic representation to exhort the role that memory plays in the life of an individual. While reading the novel, a reader can feel the poignant compassion that is evoked by the narrator's accounts. It is as if the narrator is looking into the eyes and talking. The book does come together very well in the end where all the threads, each representing a story, join to strengthen the theme and present a picture of childhood and friendship of the Khasi girl, D.

When it comes to writing style readers can feel the semblance in style and language of Daribha Lyndem with the likes of RK Narayan and Ruskin Bond. The imageries paint the picturesque locale of the hill station with its beauty and bounty of Shillong. While reading this book one can fantasize about one of the wettest spots in India when the narration sharpens its focus on the luxuriant verdurous hills; the rain-soaked bridges; cold air that turns breath into fog; rows of eucalyptus shooting up in the heaven from roadsides; the Wah Umkhrah river that meanders through Shillong; houses fenced by bamboo sticks covered with creepers; women in beautiful jaiñsems, the traditional attire of the Khasis; and the sporadic hailstones. The editorial exercises could have been sharper to take care of some of the typos etc. On the whole, *Name Place Animal Thing* comes with a unique appeal. Though it is a thin volume, the impact lasts longer in the mind of a reader.

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