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November Light: The Narrative of a Creative Process

23 May, 2011 - Like anywhere else in the world, people in Bhutan are also born storytellers. Except that they don't write. And it's someone else, often strangers from abroad, who weave Bhutan and its people into an unforgettable narrative.

This is what has happened in November Light, a beautiful anthology of creative writing by a group of young college students. The book presents a wide spectrum of creative expression by students from the country's first private college under the supervision of an accomplished London-based writer, poet and scholar, Dr Nitasha Kaul.

The writings in the book are a result of the first ever creative writing course in Bhutan run by the Royal Thimphu College in the autumn semester of 2010. And for Nitasha, time became a happy revelation: "As the term progressed, the immense creative potential of the young individuals became apparent, and it seemed an excellent idea to put some of their work together as a book; something tangible that would showcase their talents, and in the future serve as a reminder to them of their own abilities."

The authors of November Light don't write about things obvious: prayer flags, temples, butter tea, or the majestic mountains. Instead they explore universal themes of love (Deadly Blue), friendship (The Five Fireflies), innocence (Ideal Boy), and family and customs (Stripped).

Ideal Boy explores the innocent wanderings of a four-year-old child who has lost both his parents and is unwittingly making up for the void by wandering among college students at the Royal Thimphu College.

Stripped is a narrative of warmth, love, hate and loss – mother's warmth, sister's love, hate for a defiling father, and ultimately a loss immeasurable – the loss of faith. In the story, a father has sex with his daughter as dictated by customs of the community before handing her over to a priest as his wife-consort.

And then almost as a relief to the reader appears a story Mark Twain would have been glad to have it as a chapter in his The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. The Five Fireflies will remind the reader of Tom Sawyer and his friends, plotting laziness and adventures. Written in a simple matter-of-fact language, the Fireflies narrative evokes a sense of happy carelessness the five characters in the story exude in their everyday life. For them life has to be lived as dictated by the impulse.

Reading November Light reveals a vast pool of untamed creative potential among young Bhutanese. As much as the country, as the youngest democracy in the world, is coming to terms with the demands of new polity, the writers in the book seem to be coming to terms with the continuous shaping up of individual identity. They write like young Maggie Tulliver running away from the suffocation of family confines in search of her own sanctuary.

The young budding writers of RTC achieve what their mentor tells them: "The real celebration of writing is the way it might reach out and change ordinary people's lives, perhaps even survive over time to convey a sense of the shared emotions and the lasting absurdities of the human condition."

As the first anthology of matured writing to come from a college, the writers do unconsciously live up to their critical attitudes that largely hinges upon the lofty expectations of their country, parents, friends, and above all their mentor and guide, Nitasha.

Contributed by Gopilal Acharya

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