

## Sugar, Smoke, Song

**Reema Rajbanshi**

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Reema Rajbanshi's debut novel-in-stories *Sugar, Smoke, Song* collects its thematically linked pieces into three clusters with recurring characters.

The first group, starting with "The Ruins," centers on beautiful Indo-Burmese identical twins, Maina and Biju. Their intimacy is altered when Biju's face is slashed and scarred by a knife-wielding stranger in a New York City subway, just after 9/11. Another set concerns Assamese American dancer Jumi and her on-again/off-again relationship, complicated by skin tone and class, with a Chinese and Indian American, Walter. The final three stories, starting with "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter," feature Nirmali, the daughter of impossible-to-please immigrants. Nirmali has also suffered from violence, and has scars on her hips. Later, grown up, she finds herself in a relationship with the darker-skinned Yusuf, an artist who tells her, "Never forget you are not black."

Skin color is always an issue. In "One Tiny Thing," Nirmali, whose mother refused to let her in the kitchen because "you don't need to be like me," winds up working simultaneously at the Delhi Delight restaurant and as a housekeeper and nanny for light-complected immigrants, taking care of a baby with "durian-stink diapers" while looking for a voice-coaching job.

Rajbanshi employs a wide range of motifs, including imagery from the Ramayana, from ballet, and from the kitchen via starfruit (including recipes) in "The Stars of Bollywood House." These are not stories to rush through: Rajbanshi's language is original and worthy of close attention. She frequently uses nouns as verbs to fresh effect: a character "zombies" through the American Civil War, another "mermaids" into water, and a girl "dervishes" into a rosebush.

Sensuous and surprising, *Sugar, Smoke, Song* presents variations on a theme of Assamese American women's identities, including hardship with a dash of hope.

SUZANNE KAMATA (July / August 2020)

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